

# Hard-to-place kids get loving homes

p.2

718-822-2604

Downey Side

Jul 07 09 10:22a

**C**armela and Robert Masiello flanked Jaimie, whom they are in the process of adopting. She had come to live with them just a few weeks before.

She's a pretty 16-year-old who had been living in an upstate group home for the past 4½ years.

Her prospective parents each have children in their 20s and 30s — and eight grandchildren — between them.

"We wanted a child together that we could call our own," said Carmela.

They smiled at each other, and Carmela playfully teased the teen.

"You're still on the honeymoon," joked Anna McNamara, area director of Downey Side, the agency that placed Jaimie with the Masiellos.

"Talk to us next year."

The family laughed, and Carmela hugged Jaimie even tighter.

Downey Side is a national adoption agency that places older, special-needs children with families.

It was founded by the Rev. Paul Engel in 1967. He was from the Bronx, living in Springfield, Mass., and asked a woman named Downey to take in a homeless teenager. They became mother and son.

That boy was the first of 6,000 kids to be placed in a stable home by Downey Side in the years since.

Engel opened 10 offices across the country, including one in the Bronx three years ago.

"He always wanted to come back to the Bronx," said McNamara.



## Around the Bronx

With Patrice O'Shaughnessy

"Our children are 7 years and up, and hard to place because they have special needs," McNamara said.

She said new laws against international adoptions and the great expense of infant adoptions have helped to increase the number of older-child adoptions.

But there are still so many children waiting.

McNamara said there are 126,000 kids in foster care around the country, more than half of whom are available for adoption.

"The average age is 11 or 12, and most are African-American and Hispanic," she said. "So we are trying to get more minority families."

People find out about Downey Side mostly by word-of-mouth, although the agency does recruit through churches and organizations.

The agency is nondenominational and arranges adoptions for singles and people of every race, sexual orientation and religion.

Still, the Masiellos were "atypical," McNamara said.

"Most of our parents have no children, or one and want more, and they are mainly people with infertility issues," she said.

McNamara adopted Ryan, now 16, from Texas seven years ago, and uses her experience with him to "punctuate the curriculum" that parents must learn.

"Ryan has been through a lot in his first eight years, and we hope to make up for that in the next eight," she said.

A smiling, blonde youth, Ryan is a rising high school junior who plays guitar and hockey. He had never experienced snow until he came to the Bronx to live with McNamara.

"I love it," he said.

Most of the kids have suffered abuse at the hands of their biological parents or foster parents, and "all suffer the grief and loss of their biological family," said McNamara.

**R**obert Masiello said he and Carmela began talking about adopting a child about 3½ years ago.

"You have to be proactive," he said.

"You go through so many hits, you get disgusted."

"We found Jaimie in November. Her picture did it," said Carmela. "After several disappointments, we both said, 'This is it.'"

Raising a special-needs child — whether physically, mentally, or emotionally disabled — is a challenge.

"We didn't know what to expect in the beginning," said Robert. "Now, it feels like we're helping someone who needs it and had a rough time."

"We've been out to dinner. We saw 'Mamma Mia,'" said Carmela.

"I liked the movie, so I liked the play," said Jaimie, a shy-demeanored girl with long, dark hair and glasses.



Anna McNamara, area director of Downey Side, with her adopted son Ryan, 15, at the center.

Photo by Viorel Florescu

She says she isn't good at talking; she's better at writing to express herself.

She penned a note to Carmela and Robert telling them, "I'm the luckiest girl in the world."

Carmela filled up at the note, written on yellow loose-leaf paper.

"She's a wonderful child," Carmela said, beaming at Jaimie. "She has a lot of love."

Asked if they were spoiling their new charge, Carmela said they were trying not to.

"You have to back up a little," she said.

"And then get her the cell phone anyway."

poshaughnessy@nydailynews.com

Ny Daily News  
7/7/09