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THE OKLAHOMAN PRESENTS

# Finding a forever

# family

This is the story of a  
little boy and a little  
girl finding a home  
after years of trying  
to survive the system.

BY MICHELLE KELLEY AS TOLD TO YVETTE WALKER

Michelle Kelley gets a hug from her daughter after her Adoption Ceremony was finalized on  
Thursday, July 28, 2011.

Photo by David McDaniel, The Oklahoman





**Editor's note:** Michelle Kelley, an employee at The Oklahoma Publishing Co., told her story of trying to adopt a child to Night News Director Yvette Walker. Walker relates the story here, with additional reporting and editing. Kelley's experiences are real. Her children, identified only through nicknames, also are real. November is National Adoption month.

**I** had always wanted to be a mom. But I never married, and I always thought that was the way you had to do it. You had to be married to be a mother.

But it was 2008, and I was in my late 30s and I finally felt the ticking of that proverbial clock. Still, I couldn't give up this desire to be a mother. Not necessarily to give birth to children, but to be a mother to a child who needed one. So I decided to adopt.

The road looked bright. I had decided to open my home to a child who needed me, and we'd have a happy ever after ending. Actually, that is what happened. I just didn't realize it would take nearly three years, two agencies, two children and many roadblocks along the way.

This isn't the story of Michelle Kelley. It's the story of a little boy and a little girl nicknamed Biggin' and Darlin'. And it's also the story of why some children have to wait so long to find families to take them in and love them forever — 'forever families.'

The 'forever family' concept is popular among adoption circles. It's the idea of a child being placed with and staying with one family — being connected. Here in Oklahoma, it takes a long time to happen in many cases, and it almost didn't happen with me.



STORY CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Michelle Kelley, left, goes over paperwork with DHS specialist Margaret Young as Young finishes up her home inspection on Friday, Jan. 16, 2009.

Photo by Chris Landsberger, The Oklahoman



# Following the process

The adoption process is like a living, breathing slow-moving tree sloth that seems to exist to keep you from finding your “forever family.” There are reasons for being thorough, of course. It’s important to find honest and sincere people that really want kids.

On the Oklahoma Department of Human Services website are the words “Stronger Families Grow Brighter Futures.” It’s a phrase I believe and what I wanted to be a part of. DHS provides foster care and adoption services for children who are in the custody of DHS. The need is great, and these kids have the right to be who they were intended to be — not a product of their past. In November 2008 I called, and said I wanted to apply to adopt.

I had already decided that I would take a nonwhite child. I knew the adoption process takes long enough, and I didn’t want race or gender to delay my getting a child. In April 2009, almost six months after I started, I was approved to adopt a child. I was happy and excited.

I received a caseworker, who would match me with potential children. But after six or seven months, I had been presented only one child to consider. I looked at the list of available children and asked to be submitted for consideration several times, but for whatever reason, my caseworker wasn’t present-

STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE FIVE



Michelle Kelley, left, listens to the speaker as she works to complete the DHS required 27-hours of parenting class on Feb. 12, 2009, in Oklahoma City.  
Photo by Chris Landsberger, *The Oklahoman*

**“In April 2009, almost six months after I started, I was approved to adopt a child. I was happy and excited.”**

– MICHELLE KELLEY





Michelle Kelley reacts after signing the paperwork that certified her to become an adoptive parent on Monday, Feb. 23, 2009 in Oklahoma City.  
**Photo by Chris Landsberger, The Oklahoman**



ing as many children for me to consider as I expected.

I began to wonder if my caseworker was representing me well enough with the other caseworkers for children who were available for adoption. That's part of her job, to let the other caseworkers who are looking for a permanent placement for children know who is out there wanting to, and approved to adopt.

I'm a single parent. I think there are some assumptions that go along with that. But I'm a single parent with means and a supportive community of people.

I called DHS often. My adoption caseworker wasn't moving fast enough, in my opinion, so I spoke to her supervisor. I suggested ways I could help. There was a process and every step of the way I attempted to follow it. If I could know how to speed the process ... what could I do to help?

I talked to my caseworker, her supervisor, even Marq Youngblood, the chief operating officer of the Human Services Centers.

He seemed open to talking to me.

I wasn't coming just to gripe. I wanted to offer help. If you have someone like me willing to take



Michelle Kelley holds her completion certificate after finishing the required DHS parenting classes on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2009.

Photo by Chris Landsberger, The Oklahoman

responsibility for the adoption process, why wouldn't you let them? I suggested that better communications skills for DHS workers would clarify the process. There are people out there who just want to love a child and not just take DHS' services and financial support, which is available to adoptive and foster parents. But the process is intimidating and for a lot of people may not be worth the risk.

I offered my help, and I never heard from him again. (Youngblood, who said Oklahoma outpaces the nation in terms of adoption placements, responded to *The Oklahoman's* requests for an interview. It accompanies this story on page 12.)

I stopped actively working with the adoption case worker in November 2009, a year after I started. I couldn't understand if there are so many kids available for adoption, why – after one year after I applied, and six months after I was approved to adopt – I would be without a child. There had to be a child waiting for me out there.

There is a breakdown in the entire system. It's not all DHS' fault. My opinion is that part of the problem is the way the laws are written and part of the problem is the way DHS is organized.

I decided that I would no longer wait to adopt a child under a system like this. I looked for other ways to give my life to children. I finally considered foster parenting.

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# Sunbeam Family Services

Sunbeam is a 100-year-old organization dedicated to serving Oklahoma City's most vulnerable residents. It is not an adoption agency, and recruits foster care families. It contracts with DHS, which seeks foster families for children in their system.

After my previous experience, I decided I would try this, although I wasn't sure I could be a foster mother — could I return a child when the time came? Still, I knew I had a loving home to give and a loving heart to offer. I called them in November 2009 and was approved to be a foster parent by Christmas.

They were very clear from the beginning that they are not an adoptive placement agency; that they are a foster care organization. I understood, but still was a little

nervous. Did I know what I was doing?

Choosing to be a foster mother was a huge decision for me. Was I willing to do everything necessary to give a child the best life? And if the courts said that the best life was going home with his birth parents, was I willing to give up that child?

That weighed on me pretty heavily. What if they go back home? What if I fall in love with them?

Those thoughts were pushed away the day I got the phone call in February 2010. There was a toddler in DHS custody — a biracial boy with some developmental delays, but healthy. Was I interested in taking him?

Are you kidding?

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## About Sunbeam

Sunbeam is dedicated to providing stable homes and loving families to hundreds of Oklahoma foster children each year. Through Contract Foster Care (Emergency Foster Care and Bridge Home Care) and Comprehensive Transitional Services, Sunbeam is able to help the most fragile children achieve their full potential. Sunbeam recruits, trains and provides 24/7 support to foster families.

Emergency Foster Care provides a temporary home for children, ages birth to five, who are victims of abuse and neglect. The purpose is to prevent children from having to spend the night in an emergency shelter, as well as to provide a caring interim home until more permanent arrangements can be made for the child. EFC placement is generally less than 30 days and, following emergency placement, children typically move into traditional foster care or are placed into the care of a family member.

Sunbeam is the only agency in Oklahoma County with Emergency Foster Care. Emergency Foster Care parents receive 42 hours of training in preparation for their role as substitute caregivers. Emergency Foster Care parents undergo 42 hours of training as preparation and may be called upon 24/7 for a placement. Emergency Foster Care parents must be able to stay at home full-time with the child in order to be an Emergency Foster Care parent.

Bridge Home Care provides a more long-term home for children, ages birth to five (can serve children up to age 9), while waiting for permanent placement with biological families, kinship families or through adoptive families.

**Source:** From the Sunbeam Family Services website

There were **8,502** children in state custody as of June 30, 2011, the end of the fiscal year.



# Biggin'

My mother had come to stay with me when I took possession of the baby boy known as Biggin'.

I'd had him about a week when she left and I was standing out on the driveway watching her go and thinking, "Where is she going? Don't they know I don't know what I'm doing?" I really was frightened. I hadn't bonded yet with the 16-month-old boy who needed so much from me.

Before Biggin' came to me, he spent 40 days with an emergency foster care family. Biggin' was 15 months old when he was removed from his birth family. He wasn't sitting up, he wasn't crawling, he wasn't eating solid food. By the time he got to me on Feb. 4, he was doing all those things except for walking. The emergency foster care family was absolutely fantastic. They taught him so much.

Still, there were issues. He had unchecked ear infections. He was delayed on speech and reactions and hearing. Thank God for Sooner Start.

Sooner Start is Oklahoma's Early Intervention Program. According to the Oklahoma Department of Education website, "The program is for children from birth to 36 months of age with developmental delays or who have physical or mental conditions which will most likely cause a delay." It's free to families.

The Sooner Start evaluation came to my house, and by that time I thought Biggin' had come really far until she started doing some tests on his eyesight and his hearing.

The evaluator told me his peripheral vision wasn't developed. She said he probably was never stimulated on one side of his body, so his eyes never learned to turn back and look that way. And so we would have to do a series of exercises to teach him how to do that. I couldn't believe it.

Tears welled in my eyes.

She said more than likely he was on his side or against a wall where there was no movement or a reason for him to look that way.

I'm glad that I didn't know the extent of his needs in the beginning. I understood from the beginning that I didn't know everything and that was protective, in a way.

It was a Friday night when I saw him take his first steps. Biggin' and I were sitting in my living room when he started walking. That was when I became a mom.

It didn't matter that he was a foster child, it didn't matter where he came from. I would love him with my entire being, and I would love him for as long as I had him.

It was a choice, it wasn't a feeling. I still was afraid. I was afraid of getting hurt.

I made a choice to choose him over myself and that's when the love affair began.

Michelle Kelley  
and her two adopted  
children "Biggin'"  
and "Darlin'"

**Photo by  
Tre Dupuy,  
Special to  
The Oklahoman**



STORY CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



# Darlin'

I knew I wanted to adopt a child, but when that didn't happen, I came to know that being a foster mom could be just as rewarding.

But two children?

Biggin's half sister, Darlin', also was in DHS custody, living with a foster care family. She had begun to ask about her brother. Only 4 years old, she had been his primary caregiver at home. Understandably she wanted to know where he was and how he was doing. Three months after Biggin' came to live with me, the caseworker asked me if I wanted to take Darlin' in, too.

I'm not sure I was ready for two children — a toddler and a 4-year-old. But I wanted to keep them together if I could. I'd never met her before and two days before she came to live with me the caseworker brought her over for 30 minutes. It was June 2010.

Darlin' is a pretty girl with a shy smile. I showed her around the house and took her into the room that would be hers. She walked into the room. I hadn't done much, there was a bed with some sheets on it, a desk, some clothes in the closet and some hair bows. That was the extent of it. Darlin' came in and saw the bows on the desk. She gasped.

"I like bows, whose are these?"

I said, "well, honey, those are yours." And she said, "those are for me?" Then she saw the closet and asked whose clothes they were and I told her, "yours." And she said, "mine?" I said "yes, if you want to come live with me."

Fast forward to just a few weeks ago.

Since I got her, it has always been about clothes and bows. She wants to wear a dress every day and have her hair fixed every day.

She was in my lap a couple weeks ago and we were reading a book she got from the library about a kitty who eats so slowly and cautiously. Darlin' eats so slowly. I was teasing her, "that kitty eats slowly like you do." And she said "mama, I eat slowly because I don't want to get it on my pretty clothes."

She continued, "I've only had pretty clothes since I've lived at this house. I didn't have pretty clothes when I lived at the other house." She still remembers.

After she came to live with me, we began counseling through Oklahoma City Educare, a private-public children's services partnership. It was a game-changer for her. Before, she was very inward. She wouldn't look anyone in the eye. She was developmentally delayed on so many levels, socially being one of them. She could only count to six and she

couldn't recognize numbers. She wasn't quite potty trained when I got her — and she was 4. She didn't know how to bathe herself or brush her hair. It was a really difficult first few months.

Just like Biggin', it was one thing after another because of neglect. I wondered if she needed more than I could give her. It took us much longer to bond.

The day it happened was unexpected. Darlin' had thrown a fit in the grocery store when she thought I got coffee instead of the chocolate milk powder she wanted. She began to escalate and escalate and it was one of those embarrassing, frustrating public moments as a mother. I sent her to her room when we got home.

I think she was escalating because she wanted to see if I was going to hit her. I didn't, and we talked it out. Later that night as I was getting her ready for bed, she said, "I have two mamas." She named her birth mom and then she said, "and YOU." That was a real defining moment for both of us.

As her foster mom, I committed to love her as long as I had her. No matter how she acted. She would test me in different ways. I have to be really creative on how to discipline her and if it's really a big offense I ground her from wearing pink. But for the most part she's just a sweet little girl who needed to learn that

## How many children are waiting?

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) provides foster care and adoption services for children who are in the custody of OKDHS and cannot live in their own homes.

There were **8,502** children in state custody as of June 30, 2011, the end of the fiscal year.

These children live in placements that include traditional foster care, kinship (family or close friend) foster care, and group placements such as group homes, shelters, and therapeutic psychiatric facilities.

The number of children in state custody at that time who had a goal of adoption (which means some may not have all parental rights terminated yet) was **2,124**.

There were **1,082** children in permanent state custody (which means they have had all parental rights terminated) and they are waiting to be adopted.

When a child is removed for his or her safety and protection, and placed with a "Resource Family."

The state of Oklahoma will assist the child's family and provide support in an effort to reunify the family. In some cases, despite ev-

eryone's effort this is not a safe plan for children. If it is determined that reunification is not in the best interest of the child, the court can terminate parental rights or the family can relinquish their custody of the children.

In more than half the cases where this occurs, Resource Parents eventually adopt the children they have supported through this journey.

The process is extensive, requiring 27 hours of Pre-Service training and having a home study completed along with Fingerprint background checks.

For Bridge Resource Parents that already have a relationship with a child placed in their home, the adoption can take less than six months.

Bridge Resource Parents that have a specific preference for a child, such as age, sex, no siblings, it could take a longer period of time.

Names are submitted with other available families across the state and the child's worker selects the family they feel will best meet their child's needs.

**Source:** DHS Office of Communications, and [www.okdhs.org](http://www.okdhs.org)

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we don't have to manipulate to get what we need in this house. We just use our words.

Her go-to behavior was to cry instead of asking for a drink of water or saying I need a hug. Ultimately, she began to modify her behavior herself. Also, she was seeing how well her brother was being taken care of. She began to trust.

On visits, the caseworker told me how well Darlin' was pro-

gressing. One time she asked me the question that would change all our lives: Would you like to adopt both Biggin' and Darlin'?

I said yes. The bright road once again unfolded before me. I could see us being a permanent family — a forever family — not a foster family. But then the red tape of the process once again confounded my plans.

## Forever family

The road to adoption in my case is not the usual situation at Sunbeam, because it is not an adoption agency. In my case the children weren't going back to the birth mother because of parental behavior issues. Even so, there still was a process.

Even though I was approved to be foster mother to these wonderful children, there was still state-required DHS paperwork to do. I had an attorney. She could get the required judges' signatures and get them to the next person they needed to go to.

I was willing to take full responsibility concerning the process. But that is not what DHS will allow.

Meanwhile, Darlin' would ask me, "When are we going to become a forever family?" She didn't understand why it was taking so long.

It was May 2011, around Mother's Day, when I realized her fears of separation were still there.

Darlin' told a friend of mine she was going to miss me — mind you she had been with me for 11 months. She said, "I'm going to miss my mom when I go to my next house..." She automatically thought that she'd keep going to a

new house.

I told DHS workers, "These are just pieces of paper to you, but I have a little girl who's asking me everyday when are we going to become a forever family." Soon wasn't good enough for her. And this is where the final paper chase began. I could have adopted Biggin' and Darlin' as early as February 2011, instead our Forever Family day happened Thursday, July 28. It would be laughable if it wasn't so sad. It was a comedy all right, a comedy of errors.

Even though Biggin' and Darlin's birth mother had terminated her parental rights in January 2011 through the courts, it is a state statute to contact the birth father, also. If his identity or whereabouts are unknown, the court may order a notice of the petition to adopt to be published in the county in which the petition to adopt is filed. A hearing must not be held for at least 15 days from the date of the court order to publish the notice.

We were required to come to hearings to determine if everything was in order and we could proceed with the adoption. We came January, but the notice hadn't run in the newspaper.

We came March, but the notice hadn't run.

Frustrated, I called the DA's office and left my court case number and the children's information. The notice magically ran by June 2 and we were able to start the adoption process.

Here's the sad thing. Sunbeam, contracting through DHS, paid me a \$365.10 stipend per child per month. We were ready to get off the state payroll in February. If you do the math, that's February to July, or six months, that I was needlessly paid.

$\$730.20 \times \text{six months} = \$4,381.20$ . All because a notice didn't run.

Multiply that by the number of kids in similar limbo situations. Where are checks and balances in that system?

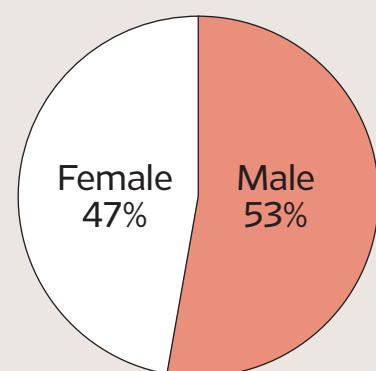
July 28 couldn't come around soon enough. I've talked before about having a community of people around me. All you have to do is look at the photos in the judge's chambers the day I adopted — we had 30 people crowded in that room.

I'm not married, but do we have a village of people around us? You bet we do. Does it replace having a dad? No, but it is the most stable environment they've encountered in their young lives.

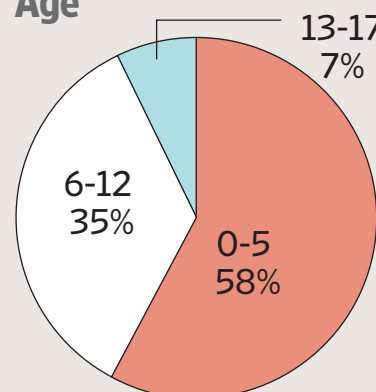
## Adoption demographics

In the 2011 fiscal year, which ended June 30, 1,382 children were adopted into families. Here is the demographic breakdown:

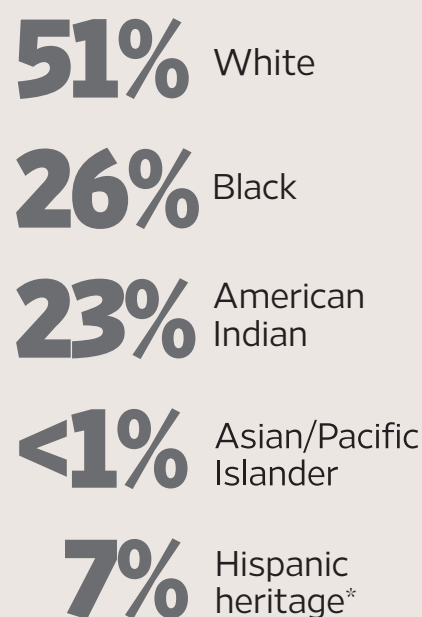
### Gender



### Age



### Ethnicity



\*Figures add up to 100 percent when Hispanic isn't factored in. Hispanic children are also counted in another category.

Source: DHS Office of Communications

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Judge Kirby, right, performs the Adoption Ceremony for Biggin', Darlin' and mother Michele Kelley on Thursday, July 28, 2011. The children were in foster care for several years before being adopted.

Photo by David McDaniel, The Oklahoman



# Reflection

People have asked me, “was this all worth it?”

I had a full life before. But I had no idea how much depth these children would bring to my life.

I say all the time, there are three of us that were saved, not two. I didn’t understand parts of myself and the depths of the love I could give, until I did this. I wasn’t sure that I was capable of the intimacy needed to do this.

I hope we’re not done. I absolutely hope we get the chance to adopt or foster another child. These children in the foster care system are America’s lost children, because the system — at least, the system in Oklahoma — is about correcting the behavior of the birth parents. It’s not always about what’s best for the kids.

If the birth parents are willing to do the work to get their kids back, there are resources out there for them. And if they are not willing to do the work, I think that becomes evident fairly quick-

ly. And to leave these kids in limbo doesn’t seem fair.

I have found that people like me — educated, willing to adopt, not requiring the financial help of DHS — we are out there. If the state would make the process easier and faster, more people like me would get involved. I just happen to be tenacious about it.

There are good people in DHS. For example, my DHS foster care worker, Whitney Rowland, was fantastic — because she cared about the kids. She was really communicative and it made for a great partnership with me.

I will never, ever, ever regret doing this. I can barely remember what life was like without them. These two children remind me what it’s like to survive, and to blossom in the midst of some very hard beginnings.

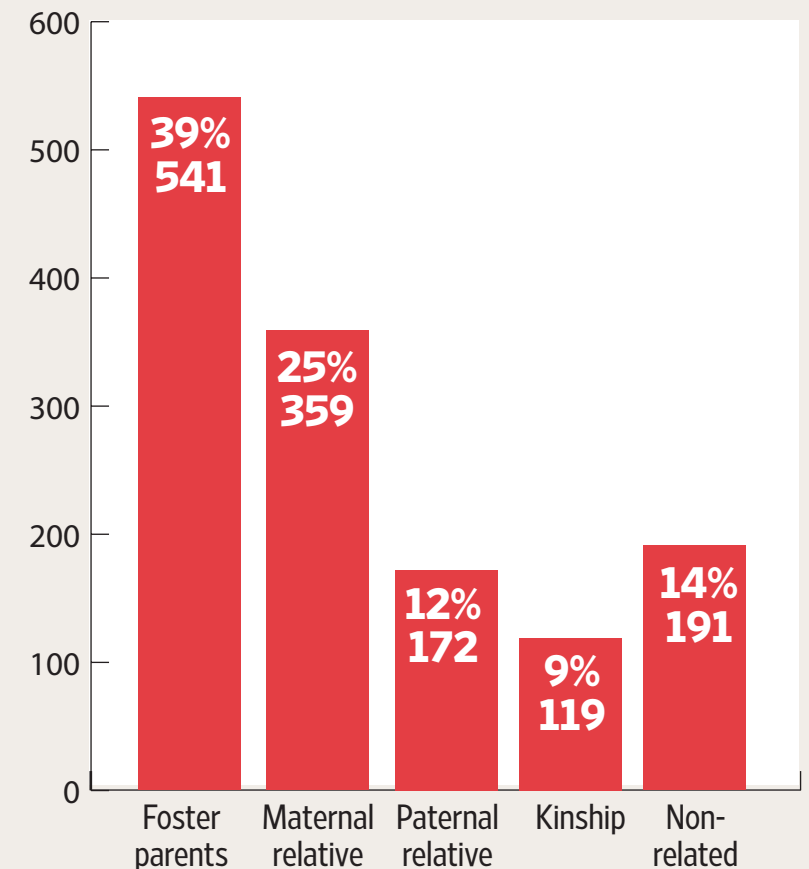
As I said, this story is not about me. It’s about a little boy and girl nicknamed Biggin’ and Darlin’. And after years of trying to survive the system, they finally have a “forever” name. My name.



Judge Kirby, left, poses with Michelle Kelley and her newly adopted children on Thursday, July 28, 2011. The children were in foster care for several years before being adopted. **Photo by David McDaniel, The Oklahoman**

## Resource type

Children can be adopted by several categories of individual, from a foster family in whose home they already are living, to a person they have never met before. Here is the breakdown of the 1,382 children adopted into families in fiscal year 2011, which ended June 30.



**Source:** DHS Office of Communications

“I had a full life before. But I had no idea how much depth these children would bring to my life.”

– MICHELLE KELLEY



## Q&amp;A

with Marq Youngblood of the  
Oklahoma Department of Human Services

**Editor's note:** Marq Youngblood is the chief operating officer of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. Adoptive mother Michelle Kelley said she talked with him during her attempt to adopt. In a telephone interview, Youngblood answered some questions concerning that process.

**Michelle Kelley, a former foster mother and recent adoptive mother, told us her story about trying to adopt through DHS. She said she told you about some frustrations during the process. What are your thoughts?**

I think we have a good process. I determine that by the number of children that we have been able to move into permanency. It is relatively high compared to the national rankings. We outpace much of the nation if you look back over the last five years. Sure, we continually improve and are open to ideas and improvements. We are always in the improvement process.

I can tell you it's not as fast as we would like it to be. Whenever we are working with one family we are work-

ing with other families through the process (at the same time). We don't have one worker working with one family. We have a lot of families in process ... with children moving into permanency. It's a challenge but that is our goal.

**Do you think you can improve communication between caseworkers and families in the adoption process?**

I would say it's a fair statement that improvement in communication is not only important but is a goal for us. If you talked to other adoptive families, you would probably hear others say 'you need to increase your responsiveness.' It's one of the primary things you can do, you can be responsive. If we were in their shoes, how would we like to be treated? For someone who is not familiar with the process, it can be frustrating, and we want to mitigate that frustration.

We've taken several steps over the last two years to be more responsive, including having our field operations director go out with a shortlist of improvements and tell workers the things that are expected, and that they will be accountable.

We're not hearing near the complaints we heard a couple of years ago.

I would like to say that we have a lot

of people who are doing a great job. They are doing their best and they are committed to improving. It would be unfortunate for the many who are doing an excellent job to have a shadow cast upon them because one or two failed to communicate or failed to be responsive.

**How does DHS work with Sunbeam Family Services?**

We have a contract with Sunbeam for emergency foster care. They end up compensating the foster family from DHS funds.

**Is family reunification or placement the goal of DHS?**

The true answer is it depends. The main goal depends on the dynamics of the situation. The courts ultimately make the decision. If a child comes in, and it's a neglect situation (80 percent are in our custody due to neglect, not abuse) where the family lost both jobs and they are accessing all they can but we come in and we notice neglect, then we may very well remove that child because of the risk of malnourishment.

In that situation, the main goal probably would be to assist the family with gaining employment ... and return the child to the home.

The other track may be closer to the other end of the spectrum, and that is

horrible abuse, perhaps sexual abuse. Let's say the male is the abuser and the female failed to protect the child, and the daughter ended up telling the mom. But the mother decided to believe the male rather than the child. The mother is not interested in getting away from this male. In this situation our main goal would not be reunification, for the best interest of the child.

There is no main goal relative to reunification or adoption and it would be irresponsible of me to say so. Our goal is to achieve a safe forever family for all children.

**Does being a single parent matter?**

What we are looking at is a fit for the children and the families. We think whether you are single or whether you are a couple, that's not going to matter too much. As long as you can provide a safe, loving family for the child. Other questions we ask are can this family support this child? Can this family feed this child? Can this family provide the means for other needs? We certainly listen to the child. If a child said, 'I want a mom and a dad,' we would take that into consideration. But if we didn't have a two-parent family available, we would ask the children to interact (with the single person).

- BY YVETTE WALKER