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Teenagers in Foster Care Need Adoptive Families

By Charlie Crist

Governor, State of Florida

A 16-year-old who had been in foster care since before his first birthday called Lanecia Radcliff to ask if she had found a family for him. Working for ChildNet in Broward County, Lanecia had spoken to him many times before, inspired each time to try harder to find a family who would meet the longing of his heart. She contacted many people on his behalf. Eventually, they were both overjoyed when the family mentoring him decided to adopt him into their family permanently. Lanecia says it is a great feeling to help make that lifelong connection happen.

That 16-year-old from Broward was one of Florida's "Longest Waiting Teens." Last December, the Florida Department of Children and Families created the "Longest Waiting Teens" initiative to encourage the adoption of teenagers. The goal was to find families for the 103 children – all teenagers and their siblings – and so far 26 have found the gift of that lifelong connection.

November is National Adoption Month, and I am proud to thank the many Florida families who are opening their hearts and adopting children from foster care. Throughout this special month, approximately 200 children will stand with their new families before judges across our state to make their new families permanent.

For those of us who grew up in secure and loving families, it is hard to imagine life without that unconditional love, and even more difficult to picture a childhood spent in multiple foster homes. Teenagers in foster care who are never adopted will be on their own at age 18 with no permanent connection to an adult.

Maria Martinez, an adoption counselor with the Safe Children Coalition in Sarasota says teens may say they don't want to be adopted because they are afraid of rejection. She recalled a teen adopted two days before her 18th birthday, saying, "Miracles do happen."

Teenagers need adoptive families just as much as younger children do. They need a parent to guide them through a lifetime. They need a family to share celebrations and challenges, whether it is something special like a graduation or the ups and downs of daily life. Studies show that foster youth who are not adopted before age 18 are at higher risk of becoming homeless, ending up in jail, falling into drug or alcohol abuse and not getting a decent job or education.

James and Cheri Pullin of Longwood know how important family is to teenagers. They adopted two teenagers, Lucy, 17, and Kayla, 15, and plan to adopt again. Cheri says, "It has really been a blessing to us. We feel like we're saving these children. It's so important because they really have a chance in life now and a future and love, and before they didn't have anything."

On any given day in Florida, about 850 children in foster care are waiting to become part of a forever family. Our philosophy is to never give up on finding a family for every child who has no family. We must continue to make the extra effort to find adoptive families for our children who are older, as well as sibling groups and children with special needs.

Please visit <http://www.adoptflorida.org/> or call 1-800-96-ADOPT to meet teens, siblings groups and children with special needs in foster care who are available for adoption and need loving homes.

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Charlie Crist is Florida's 44th Governor. Prior to becoming Governor in January 2007, he served as Florida's Attorney General, Education Commissioner and as a State Senator.