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Adoption out of delinquency court a rarity



Fred Jingles, 17, holds the hand of his biological mother (left) Kimberly Freeman and his adoptive mother, (right) LaVetta White in Pasadena Juvenile Court during his adoption proceedings. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times / June 6, 2013)

By Joe Piasecki

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Following a series of family tragedies, four years in the foster care system and a seven-month stint in a juvenile probation camp for a schoolyard assault, 17-year-old Fred Jingles sat in a Pasadena courtroom on Tuesday for arguably the most important hearing of his life.

He was being adopted.

Holding hands with his birth mother, who sat teary-eyed and wearing a blue Twin Towers jail uniform, Fred took the almost unheard of step of being united with new parents while a ward of the Los Angeles County Probation Department.

“You’re going to be all right. And your mother is, too. And I love you,” Kimberly Freeman told her youngest child before signing over parental rights to Fred’s paternal aunt, LaVetta White, and her husband, Rondia White.

Adoptions are typically a happy ending reserved for the dependency court system, which handles cases of parental abuse or neglect and oversees some 16,000 children in county-run foster care.

Fred’s adoption out of delinquency court is only the third such case in the history of Los Angeles County, said Lisa

Campbell-Motten, a probation department supervisor.

She hopes many similar stories will emerge among the hundreds of Los Angeles-area foster kids mixed in with the county's roughly 20,000 young offenders on criminal probation or living in juvenile halls and camps.

"We're breaking through a barrier, proving that our kids who get in trouble need love and family as much as everyone else," Campbell-Motten said.

It took the efforts of more than a dozen officials in multiple county agencies and attorneys from the nonprofit **Alliance for Children's Rights** to make Fred's adoption happen.

Fred, who grew up in South Los Angeles, said he first went into foster care at age 13 after Freeman had a meltdown and began abusing drugs.

Freeman's husband — Fred's father — was diagnosed with cancer in 2008 and died last year. Freeman also had a sister who died from a drug overdose, a son who died at age 15 in a 2003 gang-related shooting and several daughters taken into foster care.

Freeman has been in jail on drug-related charges since May 2012 and will remain behind bars until mid-November, she said.

While living at a foster home in the Antelope Valley, Fred said he knocked an Antelope Valley High School classmate unconscious during a fight in late 2010, was charged with felony assault and sent to a probation camp in Lancaster.

Fred said he now realizes his father's terminal illness and the sudden separation from his mother stirred up anger that had caused him to lash out.

"Dad was Big Fred and I was Little Fred," he said. "Being separated from my family was hard."

When Fred's time at camp was up, a judge struggled to find him a place to live — that is until Auntie LaVetta, who had bonded with Fred when he was a baby, drove down to court from San Jose and took temporary custody. They've since moved to Virginia.

The Whites, both retired U.S. Air Force master sergeants, have three other adult children.

Their adoption of Fred — nine days before his 18th birthday — means the teen will have a stable home, health insurance, finish high school and later attend college, said Rondia White, 60.

As hard as it was to watch her son be adopted away, Freeman said Fred is heading off to a life that will be much better than any she's able to provide.

"I know [Freeman] loves me and will always be my mom, but auntie and uncle were always there for me," Fred said.

-- Joe Piasecki, joe.piasecki@latimes.com

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