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16 Santa Barbara County children adopted into new families during National Adoption Month event at Juvenile Court

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Michelle Francisco talks to her grandkids Iziah, 9, Surey, 3, Julian, 5, and Nathaniel, 4, who she adopted at the Santa Maria Juvenile Courthouse on Wednesday.



After months of waiting, 16 Santa Barbara County children were joined with their forever families Wednesday at Santa Maria Juvenile Court as part of National Adoption Month.

Partnering with County Child Welfare Services' Our County Our Kids, the court celebrated with thousands of other families nationwide who welcomed their new children into their homes. Also in attendance were Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers, who helped be a voice for each child throughout their adoption process.

"Today, we have eight families here that will be welcoming 16 children, which is amazing because in this county, along with many others, the need for families to adopt and foster safe homes for youth is so significant," said Gustavo Prado, department business specialist for Santa Barbara County's Department of Social Services.

"There are a lot of families that are often unaware of the need for foster care, and how easy it'd be to become a resource home for a foster child, or an emergency shelter home," he added.

Emilio Rodriguez and his wife, Elisa, officially adopted 16-year-old Anthony as their son.

The couple, who had two grown children of their own, lived in Santa Maria for eight years, then recently moved to Fillmore in Ventura County, which is also where Anthony's biological father lives.

"We met Anthony two years ago through our pastor at our local church," Emilio said. Anthony, who had been in foster care since the age of 7, was briefly placed in their pastor's care after leaving his previous foster home and was going to be placed into a group home.

The couple quickly decided they were going to be Anthony's new parents.

Anthony had told the Rodriguezes about his birth parents, and the couple reconnected him with them. His birth parents also attended Wednesday's ceremony.

Quiet and shy, Anthony stayed behind his adoptive parents.

Elisa pointed to him and laughed.

"He's excited today, though. It feels amazing for all of us," she said.

"I walked into this room this morning and he tells me, 'Mom! Happy Adoption Day!' It's been a long time coming."

"It's been a long journey but we hope other families understand that there are over 400 children at any given time in the county alone that need homes," Emilio added. "I hope they can all step up to the plate, too."

Before the finalization process, the families packed into Judge Arthur Garcia's courtroom, where he addressed and thanked the social workers, CASA volunteers, parents and children, and congratulated them for being a part of something so wonderful.

"It's a wonderful celebration, yes, but there's still a recognition that there was a failure to reunify some parents with their children," Garcia said. "Adoptions are special because a lot of parents, when they have a child, there's no instruction manual. They just have to take care of it."

But for adopting parents, "You all have a choice," he continued. "You know what you're getting into. And all the children: Each of you are special because out of all the millions of children out there, you've been chosen. Don't ever forget that."

Along with the Rodriguez family, Michelle Francisco, 44, and her husband James, adopted their four grandchildren -- IZIAH, Julian, Nathaniel and Surey. Michelle said she hadn't talked to their birth mother -- her daughter -- in a long time.

"I was in the room the day each of them were born," Michelle said. "It's been hard seeing them be taken away after their mother was incarcerated."

Michelle said her grandchildren were in custody of Child Welfare Services for a little over year.

"They're so happy today," she said. "They know grandma and grandpa are going to now be mom and dad. My granddaughter calls me Mommy Grandma now."

"My husband and I are going to make sure our families won't ever be separated again," Michelle added.

Conrad and his wife Rosa Nolan adopted three children Wednesday.

"We're adopting Lianna, Alanna and baby Abel today," said Conrad, as Abel bounced around in his arms. "They were my stepson's first cousins, so we've been around them for years.

When the need came for emergency placement, we didn't hesitate to say 'yes.'"

Rosa said she's always wanted to be a foster parent, or adopt, even after having two children of her own.

"I'm really happy because now we can move forward with our children and keep going," she said. "I'm excited to start a new life with them."

http://santamariatimes.com/news/local/santa-barbara-county-children-adopted-into-new-families-during-national/article_a254cfa1-fcf-d-5da9-b04a-076460de093f.html