

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



From left, Melissa Segura, Marissa Segura, Jose Segura, Vanessa Segura, and Monique Segura.

Adoptions to be finalized for National Adoption Month

By NORA K. WALLACE, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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On Wednesday, Superior Court Judge Arthur A. Garcia will help create seven new families as part of National Adoption Month.

In what has become an annual tradition at the Santa Maria Juvenile Court, the foster youth will be legally united with their adoptive families during individualized moving and heartfelt ceremonies — with plenty of tears and laughter.

Santa Barbara County's foster care program, now called "Our County, Our Kids," organized the special court hearing as one way to increase awareness of the need for permanent families for more than 100,000 foster youth in the U.S. foster care system.

According to the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services, there are currently 390 children and youth from Santa Barbara County in out-of-home care. Of that group, 260 are part of a group of siblings, but less than half of

these siblings are living together. The county annually finalizes approximately 90 foster youth adoptions.

In 2000, Monique and Jose Segura — both Santa Maria teachers — learned just how important fostering can be for the future of children.

At that time, the middle child of a three-sister family was in Mrs. Segura's classroom. The sisters, ages 4, 6 and 7, were all separated in foster care, and the Seguras immediately felt drawn to help.

"I learned about their situation by conferencing with her foster mother, and Jose and I immediately recognized that there was a need that needed to be met," Mrs. Segura said in a statement. "We needed them as much as they needed us."

For the next year and a half, all efforts were made through the foster care system to unify the girls with their family of origin. But by 2001, it became clear that the Seguras would soon become a family of five.

"For families involved with child welfare, sibling relationships take on more importance because the siblings can provide the support and nurturing that might have otherwise been given by a parent," said Gustavo Prado, Department Business Specialist, Adult and Children Services at the Department of Social Services. "Siblings can serve as protection against the effects of trauma. Being with their brothers and sisters promotes a sense of safety and well-being, and provides them with an identity and a feeling of belonging."

Mr. and Mrs. Segura say the past 16 years have had many challenges, including learning and other disabilities. But the couple say the experience of parenting the girls has made them better people, parents and educators.

"The girls helped me find the advocate I didn't know was inside of me," Mrs. Segura said. "I found the voice I needed to support them, but I also developed a new understanding and a new compassion for children with special needs. That made me a better teacher."

According to information from Our County, Our Kids, the couple credits the social worker and the guidance they received from the program team with helping them feel supported as they transitioned to life as a forever family.

The girls have all since earned high school diplomas, and they still receive a holiday card from their social worker each year.

"When you adopt a child, you make a difference not only in their lives, but in the lives of everyone they touch," Mr. Segura said.

For more information on foster care and adoption in Santa Barbara County, log onto ourcountyourkids.org.

email: news@newspress.com

<http://www.newspress.com/Top/Article/article.jsp?Section=LOCAL&ID=567655636360364064>