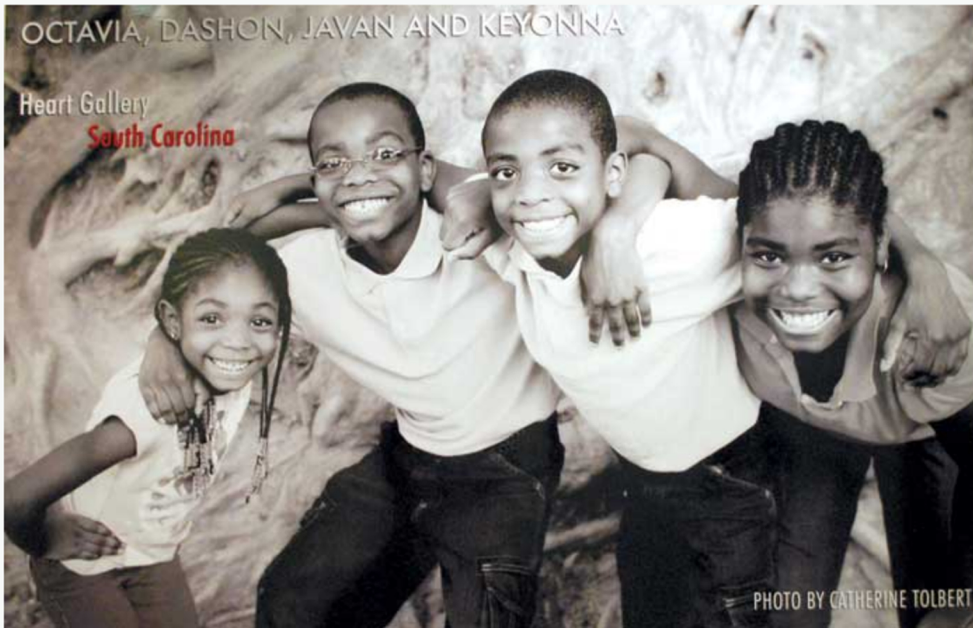


BACK

## Finding their forever families

National Heart Gallery uses professional portraits to help foster children find their permanent homes



This photo of siblings Octavia, Dashon, Javan and Keyonna is South Carolina's entry in the National Heart Gallery's exhibit of portraits of foster kids. Photo by Catherine Tolbert

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By **Cindy Landrum**

JULY 9, 2012 11:45 a.m. (0)

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Octavia wants to become a lawyer. Dashon plans to own a cleaning business. Javan aspires to be a doctor. And, when she grows up, Keyonna wants to be a butterfly or mermaid.

While their future aspirations differ, the four siblings all want the same thing for the present – a permanent home.

Their portrait will be one of 50 oversized photographs displayed at the [Chapman Cultural Center](#) in Spartanburg from July 9 through Aug. 24 as part of a [National Heart Gallery Exhibit](#) that features professionally photographed foster children from across the country who need a permanent home.

The Heart Gallery is a traveling exhibit created to find families for children in foster care. On display are portraits – some lively, some somber, all moving – of children who are waiting to be adopted but are considered harder to place because of their ages, special medical needs or desire to be placed as a sibling group.

The pictures, taken by professional photographers who donate their time, show children with big grins, brothers and sisters laughing together and a boy holding his pet white rat.

One child or group of siblings from each state is represented in the National Heart Gallery Exhibit. Octavia, Dashon, Javan and Keyonna – who are identified only by first name as are the rest of the children chosen for the display – are South Carolina's representatives. Greenville wedding and newborn

photographer Catherine Tolbert photographed them.

A professional photographer in Santa Fe, N.M., came up with the idea for the first Heart Gallery in 2001 when she was considering adopting a child and was flipping through a book of small snapshots of that state's available children.

She worked with Diane Granito, an adoptions recruiter for the New Mexico Department of Children, Youth and Families, to get professional photographers to take portraits of children who were available for adoption and needed permanent homes.

The portraits were displayed in a chic art gallery. Three kids were adopted because of the opening night.

There are now more than 120 Heart Galleries across the country, including one in South Carolina.

There are nearly 500,000 children in foster care in the United States. More than half of them will never return home. More than 123,000 children need adoptive homes right now.

According to the National Heart Gallery, more than 29,000 foster children who turned 18 in 2008 aged out of the system without ever finding a permanent home.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, there were 4,938 children in foster care in South Carolina in 2010. Nearly 1,700 of them were waiting to be adopted and 513 found a "forever home."

In South Carolina, children stay in foster care an average of nearly three years. After the age of 9, the likelihood of being adopted drops significantly for a child.

Patricia Byrd, a board member for the South Carolina Heart Gallery Foundation and sales manager for the Spartanburg Convention & Visitors Bureau, helped bring the national exhibit to the Upstate.

"Generating awareness about children in foster care is one of my passions, and so is tourism, and I thought I could bring them together with this project," she said. "Housing these photos in the elegance of the Chapman Cultural Center will only enhance the already mind-blowing exhibit experience."

Steve Wong, marketing director for the Chapman Cultural Center, called the exhibit both beautiful and heartbreaking.

"This is one of those cases where art will touch you deeply," he said. "We sincerely hope because of this exhibit, waiting children and parents are brought together to form permanent homes. This is a most impressive show."

The exhibition is free and open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. beginning July 9. A reception will be held on July 19 during the Spartanburg Art Walk.

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### ***So you know***

What: National Heart Gallery exhibition

Who: an exhibit of portraits of foster children from across the country who are in need of permanent homes

Where: Chapman Cultural Center, 200 E. Saint John St., Spartanburg

When: July 9 through Aug. 24, Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Information: 542-ARTS