

Heart Gallery's aim: To find adoptive homes for foster kids

Originally published: June 27, 2012 9:42 PM

Updated: June 27, 2012 10:12 PM

By LAURA FIGUEROA

laura.figueroa@newsday.com

EIGHT LONG ISLAND FOSTER CHILDREN stepped in front of cameras Wednesday morning, hoping it would give them a shot at their own picture-perfect ending -- finding a permanent home.

The children, who ranged in age from 8 to 17, were part of an effort to revive the Heart Gallery Long Island -- a traveling photo exhibition aimed at connecting foster children with adoptive families.

"I still haven't found a family, but hopefully that's coming," said Sarah, 16, who grew up in Suffolk County but has been in foster care for three years, now in Westchester County. Organizers requested that the children's full names not be used.

She posed for pictures at a makeshift studio set up at the Family Residences and Essential Enterprises center in Old Bethpage. FREE, a nonprofit agency that helps some 3,000 developmentally disabled youth and adults, teamed up with administrators at the Heart Gallery NYC to relaunch Long Island's version of the project.

The last time there was an exhibition focused solely on Suffolk and Nassau youth was 2007, said Laurie Sherman Graff, executive director of the NYC project.

"This gives us a unique opportunity to not only raise awareness about children in need of adoption, but to help another community that's often overlooked," Graff said.

At Wednesday's event, professional photographers such as Wai Ng snapped pictures of Sarah and other children. The photographers also instructed FREE participants on how to take professional portraits.

"If I helped one kid, then I've done my job," said Ng, of Manhattan.



Photo credit: Patrick E. McCarthy | 9-year-old Osie who is in Foster Care and looking for an adoptive home has his photo taken.

Launched in 2001 in New Mexico, the project has spread to more than 120 U.S. cities. Children are not only treated to the celebrity photo treatment, but the shots are used in traveling photo exhibitions and brochures that expose the children to potential parents. The photos snapped Wednesday will be featured in an exhibit at the Queens Center Mall in Elmhurst in September. Graff said she is also trying to line up locations in Nassau and Suffolk to display the photos.

Each year, the project in the city takes pictures of some 100 children. One-third eventually find "forever families," Graff said. She's hoping the collaboration with FREE will help focus more attention on Long Island's foster children. The most recent state figures show there are 658 in Suffolk and 326 in Nassau.

Milton and Wendell, a Huntington couple, met their adopted son Nicolas, 12, at one of the photo shoots organized by the gallery. The couple, who asked that their full names not to be used, turned to the nonprofit when they were looking to adopt, and said they felt an instant connection with Nicolas' smile.

"His smile was so lovable," Wendell said. "You could tell he needed that love in return."