

FREE Teams Up With Heart Gallery NYC

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Members of FREE photography club receive advice from professional photographers as Heart Gallery NYC helps foster children find homes

Family Residences and Essential Enterprises (FREE), an organization based in Old Bethpage, strives to help individuals of all abilities realize their full potential. On Wednesday, June 27, FREE joined forces with Heart Gallery NYC for a special day to help foster children find homes while mentoring differently-abled people involved in FREE's services.

At the event, members of FREE's photo club had a rare opportunity to be mentored and critiqued by professional photographers. All photographers volunteer for Heart Gallery, a unique organization that takes professional portraits of children in need of families and a place to call home. The members of FREE's photo club took portraits of these children alongside Heart Gallery's experts for their own photography portfolios.

"The mission of Heart Gallery was very much in line with the mission of our organization," noted Susan Sorrentino, divisional director of day services and transition-to-work services at FREE. According to Sorrentino, the partnership began when FREE realized that the organization had some available office space. Long impressed with Heart Gallery, Sorrentino and her team asked themselves "What are we doing as an organization that we could work collectively with Heart Gallery?"

It didn't take long before the group found a connection: the photographs that Heart Gallery uses to help children find homes were of interest to the photography club at FREE. Perhaps the differently-abled members of the FREE photog-

raphy club could not only be mentored by Heart Gallery's professional photographers, but take their own photos as well. In addition to providing a creative outlet, the FREE photography club also provides its members the satisfaction of seeing the world through the lens and learning to capture the moment. "They have a lot of fun with it," said Frances Floyd of her photographers, a member of the FREE staff who went through the foster care system herself. Floyd went into the system at age 14, and as an older child, she was more difficult to place in a home than the younger children. Many of



Family Residences and Essential Enterprises, Inc. (FREE) and Heart Gallery NYC collaborated on a special day of photography and mentoring at FREE. Pictured, from left to right (back row) are Sue Sorrentino, divisional director for FREE; Laurie Sherman Graff, Heart Gallery NYC executive director; Antoinette, FREE photography student; Robert S. Budd, CEO of FREE and Christopher Long, COO of FREE. In the front row from left to right are Sarah and Rafiq, Heart Gallery youth in foster care and Wai NG, Heart Gallery photographer.

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the children that Heart Gallery serves are in a similar situation, one of the reasons Floyd said she was pleased to be given the opportunity to pitch in on this project.

For the professional photographers, many of whom spend their days photographing celebrities, Heart Gallery shoots provide an opportunity to give back in a big way. Dennis Kleiman, one of the commercial photographers on hand at the event, said he first got involved with the organization five or six years ago. According to Kleiman, when an editor from People magazine approached him with information about Heart Gallery, he jumped at the chance to help the kids. Now, “Whenever I can go out and help, I do,” he says.

In addition to being treated like stars for the day, the Heart Gallery children also receive special gifts; this time, they all received iPods, donated by HSBC. Photos taken at the June 27 event will be displayed at an exhibition in Queens this September, where individuals who participate in programs at a new FREE location nearby will be on hand to help support the exhibit.

Heart Gallery NYC currently works with about 100 children, who represent more than 30 foster agencies in the city. About a third of these children get placed in adoptive homes. In order to select children for the shoot, Heart Gallery communicated with various caseworkers who gave their approval to ensure that each child’s participation was appropriate.

One of the many Heart Gallery success stories involves Milton and Wendell of South Huntington, who both wore big smiles at the FREE shoot. The couple adopted Nicholas (age 12) after seeing him at a previous event. Laurie Sherman Graff, project director for Heart Gallery, invited the couple to a shoot over a year ago, knowing that Nicho-

las would soon become available for adoption and thinking they might find a connection with him. Her hunch proved right and the couple quickly adopted Nicholas. “And the rest was history,” said Mitchell. Nicholas has been living with Milton and Wendell for over a year now, and was formally adopted this past April.

“It’s been amazing; it’s like a rollercoaster. It has its highs and its lows, but overall, the joy of bringing to him a home and a family...it’s amazing,” said Wendell, who went on to encourage adoption to those who may be considering it.

“What’s nice about partnering with FREE now is that it opens up a whole new aspect, because we can now reach out to the Long Island-based agencies too,” said Graff. Heart Gallery is currently branching out to work with more organizations on Long Island, an endeavor FREE supports.

Robert S. Budd, FREE CEO, said, “We are very wed to the whole concept of collaboration and partnership with the larger community. We were thinking about how we could collaborate to celebrate the wonderful work they do, providing these great pictures of these beautiful children, and we came up with a mentoring concept.”

Sorrentino says more collaboration with Heart Gallery is planned, so hopefully other members of the FREE photography club will have the opportunity to be mentored by professional photographers again in the future.

FREE is currently working on similar collaborations with other organizations. They hope to bring a pet program to the organization’s Saddle Rock Ranch and continue their partnership with Best Buddies, an international group that brings differently abled people together with common interests for mentorship and friendship.

