

National Adoption Month
East Room
November 24, 1998

**First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
National Adoption Month Event
The White House - East Room
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Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you, thank you so much and welcome to the East Room of the White House. We are delighted to host this event.

A few weeks ago, I received an invitation to attend a wonderful celebration at the D.C. Superior Court House, where a number of adoptions would be made final. I was so pleased to be invited to this event, but I thought to myself maybe there is a way that we could celebrate these adoptions -- that really represent all of the adoptions in our country -- during National Adoption Month, which is November, here in the White House. So we asked Chief Judge Eugene Hamilton if we could host it at the White House, and I was delighted when he said yes. And I want to thank the Chief Judge and I want to thank all the judges of the D.C. Superior Court for their commitment to adoption and the work that they have done, and I welcome all of them here.

So today in this room there are 30 children from Washington, D.C., who woke up this morning as foster children and will go to bed tonight as permanent members of families. I want to thank these 24 families for allowing us to share in their celebration. And I want to thank this year's Adoption 2002 winners, who were just introduced by Secretary Shalala, and all of the advocates and experts and policy makers and parents who are here, who work night and day to make these kinds of happy endings possible.

Secretary Shalala told us about what children think about love, and all of us are grateful for her leadership in making sure that they do have love in their lives, as well as good health and other kinds of supports. I'm also pleased to welcome Governor and Mrs. Edgar, Senator Levin, Senator Landrieu, Congressman Oberstar, Mayor Barry, and other distinguished guests. We are fortunate to have some special speakers as part of today's program.

Dave Thomas and Mayor Elect Williams are real experts in adoption. Not only because of the jobs they have and will have, but because of the fact that they were adopted themselves. You have already heard from Dave Thomas, who has reached out to the business community to demonstrate his corporation's commitment to adoption, and I hope that more companies will take up his challenge to include adoption benefits in the benefits they offer employees. He wants to ensure that all foster children have the same chance he did. We'll hear from Chief Judge Hamilton, who has adopted four children himself. What's more, in 20 years he and his wife Virginia have been foster parents for more than 40 children. We'll hear from Mayor-Elect of our nation's capitol, Tony Williams. At the age of 3 he was living in foster care and had not spoken a word. Now, Mayor-Elect, some of us who have heard you speak can not hardly believe that, but there were plans afoot by the state to institutionalize him. After the D.C. primary he said that

when his parents adopted him they gave him a second chance, and now the city has adopted him as well. We'll hear from Charday Mays. Charday's mother says she likes swimming, singing in the choir, and -- like most pre-teens -- talking on the telephone. She and her brother Steven are two of the 30 children who will, as of today, have a new permanent family.

Now, probably everyone in this room could have a similar story to tell, and I hope you do tell them. I hope you tell them to as many people as you possibly can to increase awareness, and acceptance, and enthusiasm about adoption.

You know, my husband just came from a traditional Thanksgiving pardon of a turkey. Now some of you may not be aware of this tradition, but each year starting with President Truman, one lucky turkey is picked out as the chosen one. So instead of being stuffed, dressed, and on your plate next to sweet potatoes, this turkey will go on living and being a symbol of the important power of the President of the United States.

And you know, each of us have many different traditions in our families about Thanksgiving. The food that we eat might somewhat vary from region to region, or ethnic group to ethnic group. The battles we have over the T.V. remote control between football and parades, and everything else that's on. But there is one tradition that runs through Thanksgiving, and that is family.

You know when you are a part of a family you are supposed to be able to know that there will be a seat waiting for you in good times and bad times. And then in both times the table will be filled with people who care about you. That is what all children want and deserve. And when Bill and I started working on behalf of adoption when he first came to the White House, we were struck by how many wonderful children of all ages there are waiting to have that opportunity to be a part of a family. We asked a young boy, who was with us at an adoption event a few years ago in the Oval Office, where he lived, he answered, "All over," which of course means nowhere. So when it comes to our children, the American family has a lot to be thankful for this holiday season. Children are better off because of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows parents to take time off to adopt a child. They're better off because we are ending discrimination in adoption based on race or ethnicity. They're better off because of tax breaks which make it easier for families to adopt children, especially children with special needs. They're better off because the Congress put politics aside, put children first, and came across party lines to pass the landmark Adoption and Safe Families Act. And when the President signed that bill a year ago, he helped fulfill a promise that he had made to try to put the health and safety of our children first and to move children more quickly into safe and permanent homes -- to reach our goal of doubling the number of children adopted by the year 2002.

This celebration brings us one step further down that road. We are seeing families who have opened both their homes and their hearts to children who need both. Some parents today are keeping brothers and sisters together by adopting them all. Some are adopting their own foster children. Others are welcoming children with special needs into their families. Many are

adopting across racial lines, but they are giving children what every child needs -- a place to call home.

But we can't sit on our laurels and celebrate the progress because we have a hundred thousand children in our country who are eligible for adoption in our foster care system, but are still waiting. We have to work harder to implement our new laws effectively, to help our courts as they make the difficult heart-wrenching decisions about children as quickly as possible. We have to support families, communities, states, and social workers in the only surefire way to stop child abuse and neglect, and that is to prevent it before it happens. I hope we remember that for every one of the wonderful children being adopted today there are one hundred more like them in the D.C. foster care system. And I know we can do better. We have to turn our nation's Capitol into a model of how to care for our most vulnerable children. For there is no greater test of a city, of a country, of businesses, for parents, for communities, for religious organizations, advocates, or anyone else than how we treat those most vulnerable children in our midst.

It is now my great honor to turn the program over to Chief Judge Eugene Hamilton. As I mentioned earlier, he brings to the courtroom every day, not only 28 years of judicial experience on the D.C. Superior Court, but a lifetime of personal experience as a foster parent and adoptive parent. He understands better than most of us the challenges that face every child and every adult who come into contact with the child-welfare system, and what all of us must do to meet those challenges. Please join me in welcoming Chief Judge Hamilton.