



NATIONAL REUNIFICATION DAY

Families, split by courts, together once again

Celebration at Boys Town salutes effort by adults who have earned back their parental rights

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The sound of laughter filled Boys Town's Great Hall on Saturday as families gathered to celebrate being together.

An indoor picnic marked the happy accomplishment of reuniting families once split up by juvenile or drug courts.

"We are celebrating you," said Judge Doug Johnson of the Douglas County Juvenile Court.

A disc jockey played kid-friendly hits like the "Cha-Cha Slide" and Pharrell's "Happy." Therapy dogs delighted in having their bellies scratched

by children, and a raffle gave away prizes such as jump ropes and family passes to the Omaha Children's Museum.

Despite all the smiles, there were a few tears as people related the tumultuous events that led to their family's separation and eventual reunion.

Dianna Awtry of Omaha was reunited with her 13-year-old son, D'Sean, last July. Awtry described her former life as full of drugs and unhealthy relationships.

When she was arrested by police, she said, she had such high levels of methamphetamine in her system that doctors said she was lucky to be alive.

Awtry began to turn her life around with help from the drug court and her caseworker, Leigh Gootgeld.

"I finally stepped up to the plate. I did what I had to do. I

got my family back," she said.

Awtry's life is completely different today. She is three years sober and has a "great" relationship with her children. She says the path out is difficult but worth it.

"Your rewards are right there, in your kids," Awtry said, gesturing to D'Sean, who then tilted his chin and batted his eyes, making the whole table laugh.

Maria Kenley attended the picnic with her daughter.

"I made some bad choices in life," Kenley said. After finishing family court sanctions, she was reunited with Malina, 5, nearly two years ago.

Newly formed families also participated in the celebration.

Ritchie Ashburn of Omaha adopted his 10-year-old stepdaughter, Genesis, the day before the picnic. It was the conclusion to a three-year legal journey, and

Ashburn credited the support he received along the way from his extended family.

Judge Johnson estimated that 90 percent of child removal cases in his court result in reunification. And while this is a common outcome for families, it isn't often recognized.

The celebration was special, too, for the supporting cast — such as Boys Town professionals, probation officers, case workers, volunteers and court officials.

"It helps you remember why you do what you do, seeing the success," said Nick Juliano, senior director of community impact with Boys Town.

The picnic, which drew about 150 people, was the fifth annual celebration in Douglas County. It is part of a national Reunification Day initiative.

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