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# The League of Justice becomes a family

Deonte, the Boy Wonder, wanted his family -- his *whole* family -- to dress up as superheroes for his adoption day Saturday.

*Um, no, his new mom told him. We're not doing that. I don't think Daddy is going to want to wear tights to the courthouse.*

And that was that.

Until Tuesday afternoon.

When the 7-year-old was picked up after school by Wonder Woman (Tory Kerns) and Superman (Will Kerns) and their children, his new siblings: Captain America (Jake), Batgirl (Thea) and Batman (Benny).

The suburban Justice League ran through the cold -- *Stop! Wonder Woman is losing her leggings!* -- and stood in the hallway at Sheridan Elementary School, along with the Riddler and Catwoman (Grandma and Grandpa, Teri and Scott Nelson).

For a long time, the small boy missing his front teeth, just stared.

What, he finally asked in a puzzled voice as the hallway filled with smiling teachers.

*What?*

"Do you want to be a superhero with us?" his mom asked.

*Yeah.*

"Good."

And then the boy with a backpack ran down the hall and out the door, heading for a white Suburban, big enough for a family of six and two dogs.

*Robin! Get in the Batmobile!*

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Tory and Will met when she ran a candy stand at the NBC bank building; Will rode the elevator, he bought Pepsi from her.



*Will and Tory Kerns hold their 7-year-old son, Deonte, at the Capitol.*

*Seven-year-old Deonte Kerns leaps and bounds down the steps of the Capitol after a superhero-themed photo shoot celebrating his adoption into the Kerns family.*

That was 18 years ago.

Now they live in a bungalow in the middle of town. They keep chickens in the backyard and big candy jars on the dining room buffet. Will is an IT manager. Tory is in charge at home.

They've known Deonte, the boy they call D for short, since he was born.

After Tory left for college, her parents took D's biological dad into their home as a foster child.

He's 26 now, and last year, he and D's biological mom relinquished their parental rights, and Tory and Will became foster parents.

"We went from Uncle Will and Aunt Tory to Mom and Dad in three days."

It wasn't in their plans to become parents again, says the 40-year-old woman who grew up in Lincoln.

Jake is 17, Thea, 15, Benny is 12. They were done.

Tory, an only child, had always wanted a big family -- four kids to be exact -- but Benny arrived too soon, 3 pounds and 4 ounces.

"It was my body's way of saying no more, so maybe it was meant to be that we evened out."

And D was already family. They'd loved him (and worried about him) forever.

They helped raise him. Tory pulled his first wiggly tooth, she taught him to pee standing up.

"We were the ones who taught him to tie his shoes, we were his tooth fairy, we taught him to ride a bike."

And now they are teaching him about structure and responsibility and being part of a family.

Superheroes are just about D's favorite thing. He and Benny spend hours as Batman and Robin, swooshing about in their capes and masks, playing with homemade "batarangs" at the church across the street.

Tory and Will use that love to help him. When he arrived, he didn't know much about rules, Tory says. His parents had struggled with addiction and arrests and the chaos that goes along with them.

"His life has been disappointments and letdowns," Tory says. "We're trying to be accountable, and he needs to be, too."

So when D hid the remote control a few weeks ago -- to prevent Thea and Benny from watching TV together -- and then lied about it, his mom doled out the consequence.

*Hand over your superhero costume, Buddy.*

"I think the real Robin would be disappointed in how you're acting," she told him.

Superheroes are honest, she explained. And they are trustworthy and brave. They help people and they are polite.

D is working on it, he tells his mom.

He doesn't want to be a bad guy.

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Batman and Robin run up the steps of the Capitol. It's Veterans Day, and the tower of marble and



Seven-year-old Deonte Kerns sits on his mom's lap during a superhero-themed photo shoot with his newly adopted family (from left), Benny, 12, Jake, 17, father Will, mother Tory, and sister Thea, 15.

stone echoes in its emptiness.

The brothers scamper into doorways, peeking out from behind their capes. The Justice League follows, accompanied by family friend and photographer Lexie Ehrisman.

To the Rotunda!

Superman and Captain America flex their muscles, with an assist from their padding; Batgirl and Wonder Woman show off their bare biceps.

The Riddler poses with his cane and Catwoman shows her claws. Grandparents Scott and Teri are happy and sad at the same time, knowing the boy they raised is unable to raise his own son.

"You got to smile," Scott tells D, "show those teeth."

The boy Robin is happy to oblige.

Lexie snaps away.

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Tory had invitations made for an open house celebrating D's adoption, a bird's nest and the words: a place where birds care for their young -- a home.

Saturday is National Adoption Day. It's the 10th year Lancaster County has set aside a morning to celebrate foster children becoming part of what they call forever families.

This year, 35 families will appear before judges at the Hall of Justice. It's a happy day with balloons and cake.

Tory is ready for it to be over.

"It's a formality," she says. "We're going to celebrate being done with caseworkers, having our life back."

They are going to raise D the way they raised Jake and Thea and Benny. To be a good citizen, to give back to the community. They already see it happening.

"There's been a big change in six months. I'm anxious to see what six years does."

He's learning his new family, their routines, their oddball humor. At school he practices writing sentences.



*My new mom is the best mom ... and my dad is awesome ...*

*My adoption day is coming and I'm so excited ...*

It's nearly here.

Will and Tory and Jake and Thea and Benny and Deonte will be in a courtroom soon, standing in front of a judge. They will look a lot like the 34 other families who will take their turns, too.

*Seven-year-old Deonte Kerns, aka Robin, gives a high kick as he and his new adopted family cross a street near the Capitol. The family (from left), Will Kern as Superman, Tory Kern as Wonder Woman, Thea, as Batgirl, Benny as Batman and Jake as Captain America.*

**Superheroes, dressed up as ordinary people.**