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Her adoption reward is sixfold

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CLEARWATER — When Deborah Polston first considered adoption, she wasn't bargaining on her family doubling in size.

The Tallahassee woman and her husband, Florida Supreme Court Justice Ricky Polston, had discussed adopting one — maybe, two — children.

But as the mother of four teen girls spent hours gushing over online photos of children in need of forever homes, she couldn't help noticing the large number of older children and sibling groups.

"I realized a lot of these children were perfectly normal children and they were being passed over because of their numbers," she said.

Thus began the journey that has increasingly turned Polston, a child advocate and author, into an authority on adoption and human trafficking.

In 2003, the Polstons became the proud parents of three brothers ages 10, 3 and 2.

Then, each time the boys' biological mother gave birth again and couldn't take care of the infant, the Polstons adopted him, ultimately bringing home three more brothers and doubling the size of the family to 12.

Polston shared her story Thursday with about two dozen caseworkers during an adoption training session at Calvary Baptist Church in Clearwater.

"It's the hardest thing my husband and I have ever done in our lives, but it's also the most rewarding," Polston said.

"There are enough people in this state with loving hearts that can take in a child to mentor or adopt. People can do this. ... There is a way if there's a will."

The training and Polston's public talk were sponsored by Eckerd Community Alternatives and the Heart Gallery of Pinellas-Pasco, which invited Polston to share her success story as motivation for the caseworkers and insight for prospective foster and adoptive parents.

Polston said she was a child when her interest in the dependency system was sparked by an aunt who took in foster children and eventually adopted two.

Polston is the author of the Eagle Child Series, adventure stories that teach children the character traits of a true leader. She most recently wrote

Victor's Dream, the story of a 15-year-old foster boy's hopes for a forever home for himself and his siblings.

Talking about her own journey, Polston smiled as she described how "chaotic" life has become in a home with six boys.

"But I wouldn't have it any other way," she said. "I can't imagine life without any of these boys."

With the first three boys, she and her husband cleared every nook and cranny of their home for bedroom and play space. As more children came, the couple had to upgrade to a larger home.

The crowd laughed as Polston explained how she created memories with her sons when, in a bid to bring the beach to them, she mistakenly ordered several tons of sand, which was dumped into their back yard.

She also delved into some of the difficult times adoptive parents might face, citing as examples several of her adopted children's difficulties with bonding and her own brief hospitalization with a severe stress-induced migraine.

"I don't like to give the Hallmark story because that's what I got when I went into this," she said. "I give the Lifetime story. There's good and there's bad, but the good far outweighs the bad."

It's understandable, Polston said, that many potential adoptive parents want toddlers or infants, especially if they're first-time parents. However, there's a growing need for forever homes for older children and sibling groups, who are more difficult to place and tend to lose hope.

Her latest goal is to save the children who age out of foster care, who might otherwise fall victim to prostitution and drugs as they struggle to survive.

If they can't be adopted, "at the very least, we need to have mentors for those kids because they hit the streets," Polston said. "They don't know how to set up bank accounts, how to find a job, how to find a place to live. "Who is their family? Who do they go home to?"

Polston encouraged the caseworkers to take advantage of multiple state programs available to help them and new adoptive parents. But she said there's always the need for more.

"We can't ask people to adopt these children with special needs and then not be there to support them," Polston said. "Otherwise we have this problem of these parents who can't deal (with special-needs issues) and these children go back into the system."

Keyonna Summers can be reached at [ksummers@tampabay.com](mailto:ksummers@tampabay.com) or (727) 445-4153.

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#### Fast facts

#### By the numbers

For more information on foster care and adoption in Pinellas and Pasco counties, visit [www.heartgallerykids.org](http://www.heartgallerykids.org), [www.eckerdcbc.org](http://www.eckerdcbc.org) or call toll-free 1-866-233-0790.

500,000: Children living in foster care in the United States

20,000: Average number who age out of the United States foster care system each year

100: Average number who age out of the Pinellas and Pasco foster care systems each year

3,100: Number of children living in the dependency system in Pinellas and Pasco counties

100 to 120: Average number of children eligible for adoption in Pinellas-Pasco

Sources: Eckerd Community Alternatives and Heart Gallery of Pinellas & Pasco

#### On the Web

For every sale of Deborah Polston's book, *Victor's Dream*, a copy will be donated to a child in foster care. Visit [www.victorsdream.org](http://www.victorsdream.org) for information.

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