

13 Tri-City foster kids find families

Kristin M. Kraemer, Herald staff writer

Like many people need a cup of coffee in the morning, 17-month-old Alex Muoz Jr. must have "a cup of dad."

The first words out of little Alex's mouth every morning are "Dada," and Alex Sr. is always happy to oblige by holding his son for about five minutes before the toddler moves on to other things.

Alex Muoz cherishes those moments, and Friday he took several minutes to share with others the joy he has found through adoption.

Muoz was a guest speaker at the National Adoption Day event through Benton-Franklin Superior Court. This year's ceremony, which included hearings to welcome 13 foster children into permanent families, was held in Kennewick's Benton County Justice Center.

"It's an honor for us to come back and participate in this," he said before the event. "I think the more people who know there is an alternative. ... You can see (his kids) are happy and we're happy. The Lord has been good to us."

Muoz and wife Stephanie adopted identical twin girls, Gabriella and Mya, at the 2006 event. Their adoption of Alex Jr. -- also known as "Tank" for his size and healthy appetite -- was finalized Nov. 13 in the Tri-Cities.

"Kids just add something to your home," Muoz, of Pasco, told at least 100 gathered to celebrate adoptions. "This is just our life, and we enjoy our life."

National Adoption Day is held to raise awareness of the thousands of foster children available for adoption.

As of January, more than 9,500 children were living in foster care in Washington, with more than 1,750 of those available for adoption, according to the state Department of Social and Health Services. That means the courts have permanently terminated the parental rights of their biological parents.

"There are children who are troubled. There are children who are at great risk. There are children in need of the community's services," said retired Superior Court Judge Dennis Yule. "By definition, our children are among the most vulnerable."

Yule, who adopted three of his four kids, told the crowd that "adoption is really the gift that keeps on giving."

Since Stephanie Muoz can't have children, the couple turned to adoption to start their family. After three years of near-misses with other babies and intense praying, they got word in July 2006 that they would be getting not one, but two children.

Alex Muoz is the youth pastor at Riverview Baptist Church in Pasco. The couple soon found themselves "engulfed in love by everybody" in the church family. Constant donations on the family's doorstep supplied them with diapers for the entire first year of the girls' lives, along with car seats, stroller and playpen to help when Alex Jr. came along.

"They're surrounded by love," Alex Sr. said. "It means the world to us. That's kind of a corny phrase, but it's true. Our life was good before, but it's even better."

The girls, now 3, were born locally, while Alex Jr. was born in Montana. The kids were placed with the Muozes immediately after birth and their adoptions were handled in the Tri-Cities.

When people ask the couple if the kids are their "adopted children," Muoz responds: "No, they're our children. We adopted them but they're our children."

Stephanie Muoz said their growing family has also helped her and Alex become closer.

"Our partnership has gotten stronger, our friendship," said Stephanie, who cares full time for the kids. "... That's all I ever wanted to be was a wife and a mom, so this is my dream."

Though the Muozes have had some challenges through the adoption process, they overall are pleased with the experience and plan to add at least three more children to their family.

"We love being parents," Stephanie said.