



LGBT parents sought

Adopting and fostering are options for single people and all orientations

PHOTO BY ELIZABETH DALEY

Peterson Rodriguez talks about being a foster child.

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Marriage equality was on the minds of many gay and lesbian couples across the city on Monday, but at a meeting in Jackson Heights, family planning went beyond nuptials.

The commissioner of the city's Administration for Children's Services, John Mattingly, spoke to a full house of potential parents, highlighting the possibility of adopting or fostering for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

There are close to 15,000 children in foster care in New York City, many of whom are older youth. "We have a need and we will have a need tonight, tomorrow and next year," Mattingly said.

Though many children end up in foster care after being removed from abusive or drug-addicted parents, in some cases, kids are kicked out of their homes for coming out as gay. Sadly, discrimination doesn't end once these children enter the foster system. Peterson Rodriguez, a teen who has been in foster care since he was 3 years old, said he had to leave his most recent home because he was told by his foster dad that he would have to stay closeted.

"One day I just felt like I am going to be who I am. I can't change who I am. The moment I accepted it, my demeanor changed," Rodriguez said. He found a new foster home where he is accepted.

Recently, a friend asked Rodriguez's new foster mom when Rodriguez was moving out. "She said 'He's not leaving. He's staying till he's 25,'" Rodriguez recalled, becoming emotional. For the first time he said he felt like he had found someone who saw him and loved him for who he is.

"Y'all can be stepping stones for another child like me," he told the audience. "I hope that all of you make your way to a table and pick up a packet and take a step to changing someone's life."

Not only were the parenting capabilities of the LGBT community affirmed, they were celebrated.

Maris Blechner, executive director of Family Focus Adoption Services in Little Neck, said members of the LGBT community often make great adoptive parents because like adopted children, they have experienced adversity. "People who've overcome difficulties in their own lives make very good adoptive parents," Blechner said.

Over the years, her agency has placed numerous children with gay and lesbian parents. She said adults of all ages and backgrounds are eligible to become parents in New York City, regardless of marital status or sexual orientation. "The issue is, do I want to adopt or not. The power is in the hands of the potential parent," Blechner said.

Eshey Scarborough and Paris Harris, a lesbian couple, talked about their experience caring for 17 children over the years. They initially became foster parents to address the needs of the LGBT teens who had been thrown out of their homes and now have one adopted daughter and five foster children of all ages and backgrounds. "I believe the children that have come into our lives have enhanced our relationship," Scarborough said. "We have had the most fun with these kids."

Still, taking care of another human being is a commitment and needs to be taken seriously. Councilman Danny Dromm (D-Jackson Heights), who helped organize the meeting, said he was too busy to take on the responsibility, but

encouraged potential parents to step forward. “When you take a foster child into your home that is a reward that is unequalled,” said the openly gay councilman.

“Look at yourself and see if you have space, not only in your home, but also in your heart for a child,” Harris encouraged.

In order to foster or adopt, potential parents must first enroll in a 30-hour course and open their doors to ACS officials for a home study. Those wishing to foster or adopt must also have some source of income with which to support themselves and pass a criminal background check.

“Be truthful with the agency,” Harris said, adding that it would make things easier for everyone. Foster parent Janee Harvey agreed. She and her wife Tobi Parks are raising a 5-year-old foster child whom they hope to adopt.

In order to get approved to be a foster parent, Harvey said she and her wife had to share their life stories with ACS and discuss their family history. Their home was inspected to ensure it was up to code and had window guards and a carbon monoxide detector.

After they were approved, they decided they wanted to foster a boy who was under five years of age and adoptable, and before they knew it, an adorable 2-year-old was at their doorstep.

When Harvey first got the call that a little boy was available, she was ecstatic. Then, she called back because she realized she knew nothing about the child. Was he disabled? Did he have special needs? When he arrived and walked through the door on his own, with 10 fingers and toes, she was overjoyed.

However, Harvey cautioned that the process wasn’t without its difficulties. Though she and her wife had requested a child who was likely to become adoptable, legal proceedings were drawn out, and now, a paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother are trying to get custody of the little boy, who has spent most of his life in Harvey’s family.

The grandfather claims he doesn’t want his black grandson raised by a white woman. Harvey, who is white and has worked with foster children throughout her career, said she is nervous, but trusts family court to make the right decision.

When Harvey gets upset at her son for misbehaving, she often berates herself. “I lose nights of sleep because all I want to do is love him for the rest of my life,” she said.