

NOMINATION MEMO

Eleven years ago, the Honorable Martha Walsh Hood, Supervising Family Court Judge for the 5th Judicial District in Central New York, had a vision. She had read about National Adoption Day and the efforts to bring awareness to the thousands of children across our nation in need of loving, permanent homes. Children who were placed in foster care as a result of neglect, abuse, abandonment or a combination of all three needed help. Judge Hood thought about the foster care children in her own community, they needed a voice and she was determined to be that voice. Her vision was to create an opportunity on a local level to raise awareness of foster care children who are freed for adoption. She wanted to establish a yearly event in honor of National Adoption Day. If children were adopted as a result, she would consider it a success. She established a committee and an event that has since evolved, over the last 11 years, into a community affair that draws over 600 people and finalizes an average of 50 adoptions on one day. Media outlets from across Central New York cover the event every year, story after story of happy endings cover the pages of newspapers every November. And, it all began with the 1st Annual Onondaga County National Adoption Day event in 2001.

In November of 2001, a small group, shy of fifteen, at most, gathered in the Ceremonial Courtroom at 401 Montgomery Street in Syracuse, New York. The ceremony was a small, intimate affair that served its purpose, children in care were recognized and the beginning of something special was born.

From that year on, every November, Martha Walsh Hood and Court personnel planned and every November families grew, the crowd grew, hearts grew, and attention in the media grew. The planning committee began to grow too; Judge Hood handpicked a select group of

individuals that she knew would devote their hearts and souls to the purpose of this event. The National Adoption Day Committee was born. The Committee ranged from Court personnel to local Department of Social Services staff, private attorneys, and several other non-profit agency representatives. The Committee worked year round, meeting monthly and then weekly to ensure every year was a success.

In November of 2007, Tim Green, National Football League star, Syracuse University All American, and New York Times best seller, traveled on a snowy Central New York morning to speak to a crowd that for the first year was standing room only, elbow to elbow with half of the crowd spilling into the hallways of the Courthouse. The Courtroom was silent as Mr. Green told his story of being adopted and becoming part of a family. At that moment, looking around the courtroom, Judge Hood knew she created something special. That feeling only intensified when a local adopted teenager took the stage, again silence, tears filled the eyes of every person in the room. It only proved to Judge Hood that her committee's efforts to bring awareness to her community were working. From a star athlete with a New York Times bestselling book to a local teenager without celebrity status, both of whom were able to fill the room with hope and wonder, were equal at that moment. In that same moment, Judge Hood realized that fame was not what was drawing the crowd, it was the tender stories and the message that adoption is a life changing option for so many.

As word of this unique event spread, invitations and participation grew to include neighboring counties within Central New York; Oneida, Oswego, Herkimer, Lewis and Cayuga Counties, reaching over 7000 square miles. The venue grew from the infinite confines of the Ceremonial Courtroom to the Onondaga County Oncenter Grand Ballroom in Syracuse, New York. Over 400 people attended and adoptions from across six counties were finalized at the

2008 ceremony. Word of this event traveled to New York City, an invitation to attend the ceremony was extended to the highest-ranking Judge in the State of New York, the Honorable Judith Kaye accepted. She was blown away with emotion, excitement and gratitude to Martha Walsh Hood and her committee. Interest from the general public prompted the creation of a foster care expo at the annual event. Foster care and adoption agencies from across Central New York, were first invited to participate in the 2008 ceremony, all of whom have attended every year since. Space is provided in the Atrium of the OnCenter to display their information. Guests of the event are able to browse over 12 local adoption related agencies and obtain information on how to get involved in the community and help a foster care child. In addition, the Heart Gallery, a traveling photographic exhibit, featuring children who are freed for adoption and are in need of loving, permanent homes, created by the Office of Children and Family Services, is on display.

The committee thought their event could not get any better. 2009 came, it was bigger, it was better, the number of children adopted grew and a special touch was added to the ceremony, as each child was adopted, the Judge presiding over the adoption would ring a bell. The ringing symbolized that a family was born.

In Early 2010, it was evident that the committee needed a website due to the increased popularity of the event. Onondaga County Family Court, with a tremendous amount of support and assistance from the Fifth District's Administrative Office, worked feverishly to create the first ever Fifth Judicial District's National Adoption Day website, located at www.nycourts.gov/NAD5JD. The website created a buzz in the community, prompting calls to the court and local agencies for information on how to get involved and more importantly, how to become a foster parent. A Public Service Announcement (PSA) was written, directed and

produced by the committee to encourage the general public to attend the National Adoption Day ceremony. The PSA is repeatedly broadcasted on various news channels across Central New York every year. In addition, with the support of a local billboard company, the committee designed a billboard advertisement that was displayed on a prominent highway in Syracuse, New York for the entire month of November.

The National Adoption Day ceremony also includes Signature Syracuse, an inner city youth music group who provides entertainment prior to the event; the Onondaga County Sheriff's Department, who supplies fingerprinting and issues child identification cards; a local photographer; who dedicates her time and services every single year to snap the first family photo of a newly adoptive family and of course, Otto the Orange, Syracuse University Mascot. Otto the Orange entertains everyone before and after the event passing out donated posters from the Syracuse University Athletic Department. The New York State Color Guard opens the event with a full presentation of colors and a leading of the Pledge of Allegiance with all the children. Adoptive Families also receive a large gift bag, which include donated DVD's from Time Warner, Syracuse University Sports tickets, Syracuse Crunch Hockey Tickets and an overwhelming amount of toys donated by court personnel, handpicked for the adoptees.

The Honorable Martha Walsh Hood has been the driving force behind the success of this local event, now known as the Fifth Judicial District's National Adoption Day ceremony. Along with her committee, the dedication and commitment to the issues of finding every child a permanent forever family is endless. Every year the committee continues to build on the momentum created by the previous year. The success of creating collaborations and partnerships within their community has strengthened every year and continues at an increasing rate. Members of the committee are invited and have been featured on talk radio and local

television news shows. Area businesses, large and small, continue to believe in the mission to raise awareness of the need for safe, loving, permanent homes for the thousands of children across our Nation and within their own community. These methods of outreach have resulted in the tremendous number of people who attend the event each year. Businesses and media throughout the 7000 square miles that make up the 5th Judicial District continue to generously donate goods and services to make National Adoption Day truly memorable for the general public and the newly adoptive families.

National Adoption Day in Central New York is a tribute to the many families who have opened their hearts and their homes for children in need and continue to work to raise awareness of the many children who are still waiting. Over the years, this event has grown to represent a wonderful collaboration of the Courts, county agencies, local attorneys, businesses and media, expanding across Central New York. The Honorable Martha Walsh Hood and her committee deserve to be recognized for their ongoing efforts.

JUDITH S. KAYE

July 20, 2011

To the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services;
Children's Bureau; Adoption Excellence Awards
Nomination Committee:

I am delighted to write in support of the
nomination of the Honorable Marsha Walsh
Hood for an Adoption Excellence Award.

As Chief Judge of the State of New York (a position
from which I "retired" on December 31, 2008), I
had heard of Judge Hood's remarkable adoption work
in Onondaga County. But I was truly blown away
on a visit to the area that coincided with
the National Adoption Day event they do annually.
I remember the huge, packed room brimming
over with joy — evidence beyond all doubt of
her dedication and enormous success. She won
me over, totally.

Sincerely,
Judith Kaye

“On Friday, November 14, 2008, my wife and I finalized the adoption of our triplet daughters, Grace, Rachel, and Hannah Besser. We were afforded the distinct privilege of participating in Onondaga County’s National Adoption Day ceremony, conducted at the Oncenter Grand Ball Room. This single event was the unequivocal highlight for our family, drawing to a joyful close the long and onerous adoption process. To this day, memories of the National Adoption Day ceremony remain as a keystone event in our hearts. As such, we applaud the compassion and vision displayed by Judge Martha Walsh Hood for annually planning and superintending over this very special day. Because of Judge Hood’s innovation and leadership, the adoptive parents who participate in this ceremony are provided with a highly anticipated crowning-achievement in their efforts, wherein the ceremony seems to dissipate the toil and tears expended by many to have a family ... a treasure often taken for granted by most.

It has come to our attention that the New York State Court Improvement Unit has nominated Judge Martha Walsh Hood and The National Adoption Day Committee for an Adoption Excellence Award through the U. S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. We wholly support and commend the nomination of Judge Hood and the National Adoption Day Committee with a spirit of gratitude and fond admiration for the collective difference they have made in our lives.”

Brian & Juli Besser
Grace, Rachel, and Hannah

“As an adoptive parent and past speaker at the Syracuse National Adoption Day event I can attest to the power of this event to promote awareness of the need for adoptive families, particularly families interested in adopting from the foster care system. The event was well planned, well attended and garnered significant press coverage. In fact, my wife and my 14 year old daughter were interviewed and appeared on the evening news and web site of the news channel. Having the judges preside over numerous adoptions made for a memorable event for my family”

Frank Woods, Assistant Coordinator, Office of ADR and Court Improvement

The Post Standard Newspaper

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Corrections:

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A family-friendly celebration is on tap as court officials across the local Fifth Judicial District gear up for the 10th anniversary of National Adoption Day ceremonies.

Onondaga County Family Court Judge Martha Walsh Hood said the Nov. 20 ceremony at the Oncenter is being opened to the public for the first time to attract potential foster and adoptive parents for children in the care of social services.

In past years, the ceremony was open only to relatives and friends of people adopting children.

Onondaga County has celebrated National Adoption Day the past nine years, growing from a small ceremony in the Onondaga County Courthouse to last year's move to one-half of the Oncenter ballroom.

County officials this year are making the full ballroom available.

Walsh Hood said she expects a couple dozen adoptions to be finalized with judges from Onondaga, Oneida, Oswego and Cayuga counties participating.

Some focus will be on the need for adoptive families for older teenagers, Walsh Hood said more than 40 percent of the children awaiting adoption are older than 14.

A public service announcement -- written and directed by Oneida County Family Court Judge Joan Shkane -- will be aired in coming weeks.

Jim O'Hara can be reached at johara@syracuse.com or 470-2260.

Visit www.syracuse.com to see a public service announcement inviting the public to Onondaga County's Adoption Day celebration Nov. 20.

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Six-year-old Dallas was helping set up the Oncenter Grand Ballroom for Friday's **Adoption Day** ceremony when he saw his name on a tag.

It read "Dallas Conley."

It was the first time he'd seen his first name linked to the Conley surname, JoAnn Conley said.

"That's when it really sank in for me," Wendell Conley said.

The Conleys formally welcomed Dallas into their family by adopting him at the Oncenter ceremony.

He was one of 54 children adopted by local families during a ceremony marking the 10th year National **Adoption Day** has been celebrated in Onondaga County.

The Conleys, who have 20- and 21-year-old sons, said they began thinking about becoming foster or adoptive parents about 15 years ago.

JoAnn said her mother had been a foster parent when she was a child so she had grown up in a family that often opened its door to others. She said about 10 foster children passed through her home when she was young.

About three years ago, the couple went through training as foster parents. It wasn't too long after that a caseworker contacted them about taking a child into their home, they said.

That's when the couple met Dallas. He's been living in their home as a foster child for more than two years.

"We knew he needed a home," JoAnn said.

Wendell said a friend once remarked to him that Dallas had hit the lottery when he was placed with the couple. Wendell said he believed it was the other way around, that he and his wife were the big winners.

Wendell, a professional magician who runs Balloons Unlimited from their home, said Dallas was helping set up displays of balloons at the Oncenter Thursday when he spotted his name tag on a gift basket.

The little boy, a first-grade student in Tully, woke up Friday and called out, "It's **Adoption Day**," the father said. Noting his business is kid-oriented, he added, "We love children."

Jeff Tamburo and Christopher Davis were part of the ceremony, adding two young brothers to the family they began when they adopted their first child five years ago.

"This is a wonderful end to our journey to make our family stronger," Tamburo said.

He said he and Davis had wanted to have a family of their own and foster care provided that possibility. They both are social workers with Enable.

They met through their jobs and have been together since a commitment ceremony at Grace Episcopal Church in 1998, Tamburo said.

They adopted Jesse as their first son five years ago. He'll turn 7 next month.

They took in half-siblings Joshua, now 2, and Richard, who turns 3 next month, about two years ago as foster children. It's all been challenging, but rewarding, Tamburo said.

Their same-sex relationship was not an issue for the Department of Social Services when it came to being foster parents or adoptive parents. Tamburo said.

"DSS needs good homes for kids. That's all they care about," he said.

Tamburo said they have a big house in the city, and others are often joking about whether they will adopt more to fill up the extra rooms.

"I think we're done," Davis said. He then added, "But you never know. If a caseworker calls. . . ."

Illustration: PHOTO
Gary Walts/ The Post-Standard

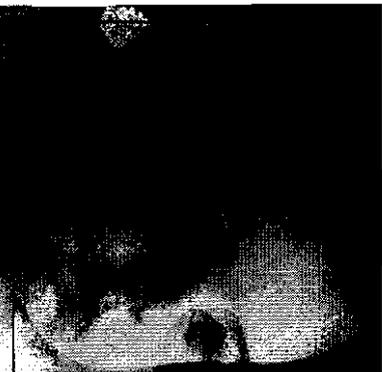
JUDGE BRYAN HEDGES (left), finalizes legal documents for Patrick and Tricia Griffin's adoption of 20-month-old Jeremiah (in Tricia's arms), at a National **Adoption Day** ceremony Friday at the Oncenter. The couples previously adopted 6-year-old Aidan (front). Their attorney, Margaret Driscoll, of Syracuse, is at left.

See a video from Friday's National **Adoption Day** Ceremony at www.syracuse.com.

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Billboard on Highway 690, Syracuse NY



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NOVEMBER 19, 2010

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC: ON-CENTER GRAND BALLROOM - 8:30AM!
WWW.NYCOURLTS.GOV/5JDNAD OR CALL 315 671-4248

I'm no stranger to giving speeches. As a former college and professional football player, a television sports analyst, the author of a number of best-selling novels, and a practicing attorney in New York State, I've delivered my share of speeches. But in November, 2007, when I took the podium as one of the keynote speakers at the National Adoption Day Celebration of the Fifth Judicial District in Syracuse, I felt strangely emotional as I stood before an overflow crowd in the Ceremonial Courtroom at the Onondaga County Supreme Court. Tears filled my eyes and my voice cracked, just a bit, as I told my own story and thought about the day that my parents adopted me in this same courthouse. Looking at the expectant faces of those children who were about to take that same final step with their proud adoptive parents, I couldn't help but think what my life would have been like had I not been adopted.

Today, I am honored to support the nomination of the Honorable Martha Walsh Hood and the Fifth Judicial District Adoption Day Committee for an Excellence Award from the United States Department of Health and Human Services. As a resident of Central New York, I have seen firsthand the impact that the work of Judge Hood and her Committee have had on raising the awareness of area residents to the need for foster and adoptive parents. Since my attendance at the 2007 ceremony, the Committee has worked to spread its message to a number of upstate counties outside the Syracuse area, and the response has been significant. Today, not only individuals, but also local municipalities, educational, business and professional groups have joined the effort to promote fostering and adoption in our area.

It is with great pleasure that I recommend Judge Martha Walsh Hood and the National Adoption Day Committee for this Excellence Award.

Tim Green, Esq., Of Counsel
Hiscock & Barclay, LLP