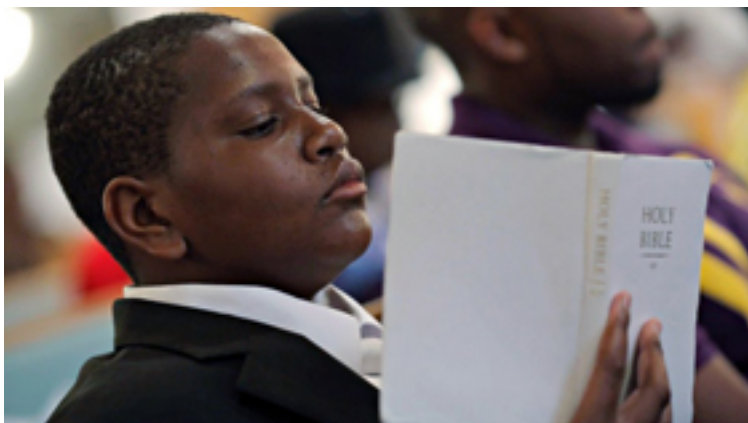


Davion Navar Henry only

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 13 November 2013 15:12



"I'll take anyone," Davion said. "Old or young, dad or mom, black, white, purple. I don't care. And I would be really appreciative. The best I could be..."

It was a front page story in the Tampa Bay Times last month that broke hearts around the world. Fifteen-year-old Davion Navar Henry Only has spent his entire life in Florida's foster care system. His mother was incarcerated when he was born, and when he did an Internet search for her name in June he learned she'd died just a few weeks earlier. He's been moved from placement to placement throughout his childhood without ever finding somewhere he really belonged. As a teenager now living in a group home, Davion was starting to feel like he was running out of time—at risk of becoming one of the more than 23,000 youths each year who simply "age out" of the foster care system at age 18 or older and are left on their own without ever finding a caring, permanent family connection.

Davion decided to take his future into his own hands and asked his caseworker if she could help him speak at a church. She made arrangements at St. Mark Missionary Baptist Church in St. Petersburg, Florida. There, as the article reported, the shy teenager who's worked hard to get A's so far this year in everything but geometry and would love to play football if he had someone to drive him to practice, stood at the pulpit and asked the congregation if "someone, anyone" could adopt him.

Davion's story quickly went viral and was shared on social media networks and websites around the country. He appeared on national television and received media coverage as far away as Australia and Japan and there is wonderful news to report. Davion's child welfare agency, Eckerd, has received more than 10,000 inquiries about adopting him and says: "We are confident that Davion's new forever family is within the responses we've received and case managers have already begun to follow up individually with each family. Davion's simple plea has raised awareness of adoption everywhere, but it's vital to remember that there are thousands more Davions out there." Davion told the reporter who first shared his story in a follow up interview: "I know what it's like to have nobody, with no light at the end of the tunnel, no one who wants you. I just keep saying, 'There's only one me. But all my friends, all the other guys at the group home, all these other kids need families too.' I just hope they don't give up. And that someone gives them a chance."

I am so grateful Davion did not give up on himself and is serving as a voice for many other youths like himself. There were nearly 400,000 children in foster care in 2012, and 101,719 of

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them were waiting to be adopted. Although foster care is supposed to be temporary, the average length of stay in foster care is nearly two years. Almost one-third of children waiting for adoption have been in care three or more years and one in seven has been in care five years or longer. For some children like Davion, foster care can last an entire childhood. One of the remarkable blessings of Davion's sharing his story is that it shed light on the thousands of children who wait years and years before finding a permanent family, especially on the thousands of teenagers who desperately want but are at risk of never finding a family: 16 and 17 year olds are just 3.3 percent of finalized adoptions. Children who leave foster care without permanent families are at increased risk of not graduating from high school and ending up unemployed, homeless or in the juvenile and criminal justice systems—with a jail cell in place of a home.

The church that welcomed Davion to tell his story served an important mission. Across the country other faith communities are helping children in foster care find permanent families and help support families to keep children from going into care.

November is National Adoption Month. If just one-third of the nearly 345,000 faith congregations in America encouraged one member to adopt one child from foster care, all the 101,719 children in foster care awaiting adoption could have a loving permanent family. Davion's pleading words struck a chord as he reminded adults everywhere that God does not give up on any child—and neither should we.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.