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## **Who can say 'No' to a child in N.D. Heart Gallery?**

Roxane B. Salonen

Nine out of 10 children who lose their parents or are necessarily removed from their birth homes become adopted by relatives or foster parents. But what of the 10 percent - oftentimes older children - who don't?

The question haunted Michelle Kommer, a Fargo mother of three who served for a decade as a foster parent with her husband, Toby. After being laid off from her job and deciding to go to law school, Kommer realized she couldn't continue providing foster care, but she couldn't abandon the mission altogether.

"Once you're inside that world you can't just turn your back because it's not convenient for you," Kommer said. "The need doesn't go away. So there was a big hole for both of us. We were looking for ways we could continue to help."

Around that time, the couple watched a TV documentary highlighting the needs of harder-to-place adoptive children and soon afterward learned through another TV show about an organization in New Mexico created in 2001 to deal with that issue. The organization is called Heart Gallery. As Kommer watched the program, she knew she'd found the answer to how to direct her compassion-filled energy.

"[The founder] had made this connection with how you can get to know a child through a portrait," Kommer explained. "And I realized, 'That's it!' Because we already knew that happens here, too, that there are older kids in North Dakota who go in and out of foster care and are in need of permanent homes."

She began taking measures to start a local Heart Gallery, tapping into an already-existing network of organizations connected to adoption in North Dakota, including Adults Adopting Special Kids, a collaborative program of Catholic Charities North Dakota and Path ND, Inc., which provides adoption services to children and youth in foster care.

Within a year, the infrastructure for North Dakota Heart Gallery was in place and the organization was running as a non-profit. In November 2008, the first gala for garnering local awareness took place at the Plains Art Museum in Fargo.

The program involves a traveling portrait gallery featuring children seeking permanent homes and families. To prepare, the children shop for new outfits to match their personalities, and are photographed by a professional photographer for placement in the gallery.

"It's all been possible through the efforts of this fun and committed group of volunteers who all have day jobs but are really committed to this idea of raising the awareness of the need for this," Kommer said. "And that's really all we do. The state takes over from there. But that's the step that was missing before - that introduction."

Leanne Johnson, AASK director, has been on the board of directors for the North Dakota Heart Gallery since its inception, and said an additional benefit, besides helping forge important connections and heightening local awareness, has been providing visibility beyond

our state, particularly through the North Dakota Heart Gallery website, where some of the portraits are shared. "There are over 100,000 children looking for homes throughout our country," she said. "North Dakota represents a smaller portion of that, but nevertheless the need is there."

The North Dakota Heart Gallery also provides what Johnson calls "a compassionate recruitment opportunity." "Not every child [seeking placement] would go through the Heart Gallery, but for those who are appropriate for the program, it's been a wonderful resource."

The National Heart Gallery has been in existence for 10 years. There are now 125 chapters across the United States with the North Dakota Heart Gallery being the 46th to join. And though some folks in the social work community especially expressed initial reluctance about the program, most concerns have been assuaged by the success of children finding "forever homes."

"I think the way we manage the gallery - by not glamorizing the situation but being honest about it and humanizing the children through their portraits - it's gentle but effective," Kommer said. "We didn't know when we started whether it would work or not, but almost all of the kids who have been part of the gallery have been placed. The success of this has been great."

In addition to the placements, there have been other positive, unanticipated effects. Some of the children involved have said the portrait session was the first time anyone had ever requested they be photographed, and expressed how much they loved the shopping experience beforehand and how special it made them feel to be part of the gallery.

Kommer also noted that local photographers who have gotten involved don't just snap meaningless photos but capture the very spirits of the children through the portraits. It's a program that has been an easy sell to the community, too.

"I think that's a North Dakota thing," Kommer said. "In a lot of ways we mind our own business here, but we also can't tolerate, as a community, the idea of a child growing up without a family. I think that's why we get such a positive reaction."

This year's North Dakota Heart Gallery Gala will take place on Thursday, Nov. 3, at the Plains Art Museum.

For more information about hosting the gallery or attending the gala, visit [www.ndheartgallery.org](http://www.ndheartgallery.org).