

Adoption completes family just in time for holidays

by Ava Garcia Special to the Arizona Daily Star



Mom Sydni, dad Emery and Natalia, 2. "I want people to know is that adoption is possible," says Sydni. Mike Christy / Arizona Daily Star

□It's the day Sydni and Emery Engle had been waiting for.

A day they weren't sure would ever come.

But here they are, on a sunny afternoon in mid-November, at Pima County Juvenile Court Center, standing among parents bouncing kids on their laps and people chatting. This day, there are 10 adoptions scheduled.

And the Engles are here for one of them.

Relatives and friends gather around the Tucson couple as they wait to be called into the courtroom, where they will officially adopt 2-year-old Natalia. The toddler squirms in Emery's arms as they wait, looking around the room. She wears a large white flower clip in her dark hair; Sydni wears a matching one in her own hair. When the Engles are called into the courtroom, family members excitedly follow them, ready for the future.

“There were a couple times where we didn't think (the adoption) would happen,” Emery says.

The adoption had been postponed a few times because of paperwork. But finally, everything was in order. “It feels a little unreal,” says Emery a few moments after the court proceedings.

Though the adoption ceremony takes less than 20 minutes, the process getting there had taken much longer.

At first, Sydni and Emery hadn't intended to adopt. The couple had been looking for something to do in the community and saw a flyer about an information session for foster care. At the time, they thought they probably couldn't foster because they were in school and lived in a one-bedroom apartment. But, still interested, they attended the session. There, they learned the requirements to be a foster parent were not as daunting as they had thought.

“We kind of went over (the requirements), and we were like, ‘We can do this,’” Sydni says.

And they discovered that they could foster LGBTQ teens — that was particularly appealing: Emery is transgender and he felt he could help guide teens through the obstacles he had to face.

“I have personal experience dealing with a family that's not supportive so it's just become like really personally important to me to be able to provide that support to LGBTQ kids,” Emery says.

Debra Howard, who is with the licensing agency the Engles use, Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health Arizona, says while other transgender individuals or couples have adopted children in Arizona before, Emery is the first to choose to be open and public.

In 2012, Devereux earned the Human Rights Campaign's "All Children — All Families Seal of Recognition" for supporting LGBTQ foster and adoptive parents. That support is why the Engles chose Devereux to be their licensing agency, Sydni says.

"For me, it's important to be visible as a trans person because there are so many people who can't be because of their jobs or because of safety issues," Emery says. "For me, I feel like if you can be visible and you're willing to be, then you should be. There are people out there who need to see people like me having successes like this."

Besides, he says, the fact that he is transgender is a nonissue to the children.

"It doesn't really matter to the kids; what they need is a safe home that's stable and loving and willing to help them heal and work past the things that they've suffered through," Emery says. "Natalia doesn't care. She cares that I make macaroni and cheese for her."

To prepare to foster, the couple took classes on CPR and parenting and got certified in first aid. Within five months they were licensed to foster children age 3 and under. They got their first foster child in December 2015, thinking that they would adopt a child maybe one day, but not until the far future.

"This would be a service to these kids and their families and that the end-all goal is for the kids to be able to go home," Sydni says.

They fostered nine children in total, some only for a weekend, some for months. Natalia, whose mother died shortly after her birth, was the longest: she came to the couple in May 2016 and stayed with them almost the entire time before her Nov. 16 adoption this year.

Sydni says she knew right away that she wanted to adopt Natalia.

“I was like ‘no, we’re not going to adopt any of our foster kids,’ and when we got her ... I just remember looking at her and thinking, it was kind of like a thought that was in mind, ‘we’re going to end up adopting her,’” Sydni says.

The first two weeks Natalia was with Emery and Sydni, she didn’t make a sound. She didn’t even cry. Sydni says Natalia hadn’t really learned to talk yet. By the time she came to the couple at age 1, she had been placed in four homes and shelters.

With the help of a therapist, she started speaking words about six months ago, Sydni says, and the family practices speaking with her at home.

“She’s come a really long way in a short time,” Sydni says.

When Natalia’s father’s rights were severed in September 2016, the couple thought about adopting her and decided to go for it.

“We talked about it a lot with friends, like, ‘are we crazy to say yes to adopting this baby?’” Emery says. “And our friends were like ‘well, what do you think when you think about the future?’ And that’s really what it was: We couldn’t picture any time in our lives that she wouldn’t be around, so it just seemed kind of obvious at the point that it’s probably the right decision.”

After Natalia was up for adoption, one of her relatives was interested in adopting her, and Natalia lived with her for a five-week period. However, it did not work out, and Natalia returned to live with the Engles.

“That was scary and heartbreaking, but of course we understood,” Emery says. “There’s obviously a preference for a child to be with their family.”

The Engles said the adoption process was easier because they were foster parents first. Adoption outside of foster care can take years and can be expensive, but as foster parents, the Engles’ adoption costs were covered by the state.

“I think that’s the biggest message that I want people to know is that adoption is possible. You don’t have to be wealthy, it’s not expensive if you do it through foster care. ... I think adopting older kids, people don’t realize that it’s possible,” Sydni says.

Now, the Engles enjoy spending some time with just Natalia. Most of the time she has been there, there were two or three other children they were fostering. Natalia won’t be the only child much longer: They plan to foster a transgender teen whom they have fostered before.

Though the family celebrated the adoption day with dinner out at a restaurant, they are planning a big adoption party after the holidays so Natalia can meet some of the Engles’ extended family members.

Until then, the family is excited to spend the holidays together. Their Christmas tree is lit up, complete with a “Moana” ornament that plays a song from the movie Natalia loves.

Seated at the coffee table in their living room, Natalia draws on orange construction paper alongside Emery. He draws a house on the paper, and Natalia practices sounding out the word. She may just be learning the word “house” now, but already she’s found her home.

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