

Johnson Family News Stories

Archived Stories Courtesy of the Syracuse Post-Standard

February 2011

Headline: ADOPTION AND ADIEU DAY

Subhead: EVENT INCLUDES TRIBUTE TO ADOPTION CLERK WHO'S RETIRING

Reporter: By Jim O'Hara Staff writer

Series:

Type:

Day: Saturday

Dateline:

Publication date: 11/18/2006

Text: For three decades, Donna Tarver has worked very quietly behind the scenes shepherding the paperwork for adoptions through the Onondaga County Family Court system.

Friday, officials turned the spotlight on Tarver during National Adoption Day ceremonies at the Onondaga County Courthouse.

Tarver, who retires at the end of the month, struggled to hold back tears as she was lauded for assisting with more than 7,000 adoptions during 35 years.

Twenty-eight more were conducted Friday by Family Court Judges Martha Walsh Hood, Bryan Hedges and Michael Hanuszczak.

Fifth Judicial District Administrative Justice James Tormey said those were among some 3,100 adoptions scheduled to be handled across the country Friday.

"I don't know what we'll do without you. Our security blanket will be gone," adoption lawyer Karen Vedder said in applauding Tarver's work.

Vedder said Tarver is such a stickler for detail that any paperwork that survived her review as the Family Court adoptions clerk was guaranteed to win judicial approval as well.

Vedder recalled meeting Tarver in 1989 after being assigned to handle an adoption case for which the paperwork had already been rejected four times by Tarver. Tarver greeted her with "a knowing smirk" but ended up accepting the paperwork, Vedder said.

They have had a good working relationship since, although the lawyer confessed to being intimidated at times by the gatekeeper clerk.

Lawyer Kevin Harrigan told the courthouse gathering one way of looking at Tarver was that she was "kind, helpful, principled, knowledgeable, dedicated and hardworking." On the other hand she might be seen as "picky, very picky, stubborn, uncompromising and unwilling to accept small bribes," he said to laughter.

But he concluded that Tarver was "the single force that drives this special part of our court" and that she had helped create many "wonderful moments for hopeful parents and beautiful kids."

Tarver said she started working as a court stenographer in Family Court in 1969 and began handling adoption case paperwork about three years later. She downplayed her role when asked Friday about helping so many families navigate the adoption paperwork process.

"I just do my job," she said.

Diana and Dave Johnson, who have adopted 14 children over the past three decades, reacted with dismay at the loss of the clerk who handled the paperwork for each of their cases.

"You got it done," Diana Johnson said.

"I never knew you were so scary," Dave Johnson said with a laugh.

"We only saw the good part," Diana Johnson noted.

Headline: ADOPTION ADDS LIFE AND NOISE TO HOME

Subhead:

Reporter: JIM O'HARA COURTS WRITER

Series:

Type: COLUMN

Day: Friday

Dateline:

Publication date: 11/25/2005

Text: It's not unusual for there to be tears as a result of Family Court actions. But tears of joy - that's unusual.

And there were plenty of them - along with laughter at last week's Adoption Day ceremony at the Onondaga County Courthouse.

There was an eruption of laughs as singer Jolie Scarantino - with all the children from the ceremony sitting and standing around her - came to the end of her rendition of "Over the Rainbow," and one of the youngsters by her side piped up with a hearty, "One more time!"

Lawyer Kevin Harrigan noted clients Diana and Dave Johnson are truly an adoption lawyer's best friends as they have adopted 14 children over the years to add to their three "homegrown" offspring. He noted the key difference between the Johnson household and others may be one of decibels.

"It's a little louder than your house, but it works," he said.

What's the best thing about having so many children?

"Christmas," Dave Johnson replied. Unfortunately, he noted, as a deputy chief for the Syracuse Fire Department, he's slated to work Christmas Eve and Christmas Day this year.

Headline: 14 KIDS WEREN'T ENOUGH

Subhead: FIRE OFFICIAL'S FAMILY ADDS 3 ON NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY

Reporter: By Jim O'Hara Staff writer

Series:

Type:

Day: Saturday

Dateline:

Publication date: 11/19/2005

Text: Diana and Dave Johnson apparently are firm believers that there's always room for one more: in their home, at their dinner table, in their hearts.

The Johnsons proved that again Friday as they adopted three children, bringing to 17 the number of "home-grown" and adopted children they call their own.

Ten of their children, ranging in age from 23 to 9, share the Johnsons' six-bedroom, two-bathroom home in Tully. One child died as an infant. One's in college. One's in the Army. Four others are married. And there are six grandchildren.

"We're stretched, but we're blessed," Diana said. She credited daughter Hannah, 11 - adopted five years ago from an orphanage in the African nation of Sierra Leone - with convincing the family that there was room to take in three siblings whom she had known in the orphanage.

Michaela, 14, and 9-year-old twins Grace and David officially became members of the Johnson family Friday during Adoption Day ceremonies at the Onondaga County Courthouse.

"It's with great joy that we celebrate these adoptions today," Diana told the courthouse gathering.

There were whoops of joy, bursts of applause, crying children and colorful balloons, occasionally breaking loose from little hands and floating to the courtroom ceiling above, as Family Court Judges Martha Walsh Hood, Michael Hanuszczak and David Klim presided over 14 adoptions for 11 families.

The Alliance for Children's Rights created the first National Adoption Day in November 2000 to call attention to the number of children in foster care who are eligible for adoption. Walsh Hood helped organize the first local Adoption Day four years ago and has been a driving force behind each year's ceremony since.

In welcoming a standing-room-only crowd at the courthouse Friday morning, Fifth Judicial District Administrative Justice James Tormey III noted there are 523,000 children in foster care across the United States, with more than 118,000 waiting to be adopted. More than 3,000 adoptions were expected to be finalized this weekend nationwide as part of Adoption Day ceremonies, he said.

Laura Knittel, 20, who was adopted at the age of 9 by the person who had been her caseworker when she was a child in foster care, talked at Friday's ceremonies about her experiences and the importance of getting children out of foster care - either by returning them to their families or having them adopted - as quickly as possible.

David Hoalcraft, an information and technology manager at Syracuse University's Computing and Media Services, shared with the gathering his thoughts about the "saint" who adopted him after caring for hundreds of foster children and having seven children of her own.

And there were the Johnsons, who sought to downplay any suggestion that they were somehow doing something special in adopting 14 children over the last 30 years.

"We have been blessed. We have always been blessed, and we wanted to share that," said Dave Johnson, a deputy chief for the Syracuse Fire Department.

"It's real. It's not fairy tale. We have problems like everybody else," he said, adding - to laughter - that sometimes they actually have to deal with the kids fighting. "But it's all worth it," he added.

Diana, who works part time at New Hope Family Services, said the family wanted to adopt the three siblings from Sierra Leone several years ago but wondered how they would be able to manage it at that time. Placement of the three children in Monroe County didn't work out. When the Johnsons learned of that, they welcomed the trio into their home in October 2004.

"We had never forgotten about them," Diana said. She also publicly thanked daughter Hannah "for encouraging us to open our hearts a little more."

"I think it's great," Hannah said of adding as new siblings the three children she knew from her orphanage. The decision was a simple one.

"They needed a home," she said.

Headline: TULLY COUPLE ADOPTED A VERY "GIVING" LIFESTYLE

Subhead: IN NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY EVENT, JOHNSONS SPEAK OF THEIR 11 ADOPTED CHILDREN.

Reporter: By Jim O'Hara Staff writer

Series:

Type:

Day: Saturday

Dateline:

Publication date: 11/23/2002

Text: When Diana and Dave Johnson married and talked about having children, she was thinking maybe four. He was thinking six.

"If he'd ever told me we would have 14 children, I'd have said he was crazy," Diana said, laughing.

But that's what happened.

Over the past 27 years of their 30-year marriage, the Johnsons have adopted 11 children in addition to having three "homemade kids." They've also cared for 14 foster babies.

The Johnsons and nine of the children were on hand Friday as local officials celebrated National Adoption Day at the Onondaga County Courthouse. One day has been set aside each of the last three Novembers to call attention to the large number of children in the foster care system nationwide who are available for adoption.

Their story sounds like "The Waltons" meets the United Nations.

The adopted children include five African-American youngsters, one Hispanic and one Caucasian, one child from India, another from Korea, one from the Philippines and one from Sierra Leone.

They range in age now from 33 to 6, and eight of them still live in the family's six-bedroom, two-bathroom home on Route 80 in Tully.

The Johnsons have made adoption a lifestyle, something they had considered before they married.

"When we were going together, it was something we wanted to do," Diana said. "We wanted to share our hearts and open our home to other children, and it kind of snowballed."

How do they manage? "We've chosen the priorities in our lives. We share clothing. We don't have fancy furniture, or a fancy house," Diana said. "Really, we've just lived simply."

Diana works at New Hope Family Services, where she counsels birth mothers looking to put their children up for adoption. She volunteered on the job for 17 years before becoming a paid part-time employee six years ago.

Dave is a deputy chief for the Syracuse Fire Department.

Diana had no trouble when asked to name the children and give their ages: Beverly, 33; Rebecca, 27; Tim, 26; Sarah, 24; Rani, 23; Andy, 20; Danny, 17; Rachel, 15; Alysia, 14; Mark, 14; Ben, 11; Hannah, 8; and Sam, 6.

Another of the adopted children, Joel, died as an infant, she said. "We always count him as one of the children," she quickly added.

Hannah came from the same orphanage in the African nation of Sierra Leone as three other children adopted by local families in a public ceremony at the courthouse Friday morning. The Johnsons spoke briefly at the ceremony.

Love isn't based on the color of one's skin or one's national origins, Diana said, noting the children in the family have learned to just love each other just as brothers and sisters.

Lawyer Kevin Harrigan, who helped handle the adoptions for the families, praised the Johnsons for what they have done. "These people have redefined the verb 'giving,'" he said.

The Johnsons' washer and dryer are running constantly, and they're far from new, Diana said. She laughed again as she said the repairman is at the house so often that he's considered part of the family.

Grocery shopping is done every three days or so, Diana said. She said the family goes through at least a gallon of milk, a gallon of juice and a loaf of bread each day.

On any given day, there are at least 10 or 12 of the family members home for dinner, she said.

Beverly, the oldest of the children, also was older than any of the others when they were adopted. She was 15 1/2 and had been with another family in a situation that didn't work out, Diana said.

"We asked her if she wanted to be part of our family and left it up to her," Diana said. "I'll never forget the day she called and said, 'Hi, mom, I want to be in your family.'"

According to Diana, there's no difference in the children when it comes to their acceptance at home.

"There's no difference between a 'homemade child' and an adopted child in the heart of a parent," she said.

Headline: FIREFIGHTERS, POLICE OFFICERS HONORED FOR HEROISM

Subhead:

Reporter: By John Doherty Staff Writer

Series:

Type:

Day: Tuesday

Dateline:

Publication date: 8/15/1989

Text: Sixteen city firefighters and police officers were cited for bravery and heroism Monday during a ceremony at Clinton Square.

The ceremony was presided over by Police Chief Leigh F. Hunt and Fire Chief Donald Moriarty. Also attending the ceremony were Mayor Thomas Young, District Attorney Robert Wildridge and Herald-Journal Managing Editor Timothy Atseff.

"The police and firefighters of Syracuse give even beyond what a dedicated public servant is expected to give," Young told the crowd of about 100 who assembled for the ceremony. "This is a very grateful community."

The ceremony originally was scheduled for July 10, but was postponed because of the funeral of fire Capt. Norman J. Rowe, who died July 7 while at the scene of a fire on North Salina Street.

ROWE, 60, who was cited for valor in 1963 and 1974 and received the department's Francis Hendricks Award for bravery in 1966, was a member of the fire department's awards selection committee.

Officer Mark LaMontagne was presented with the Mayor's Achievement Award for capturing an armed robbery suspect on Jan. 2, 1988.

LaMontagne was searching the Valley Plaza area for suspects in an attempted armed robbery when he spotted three youths and told them to stop.

Two of the teen-agers complied, but the third continued to walk away from the area.

"Displaying physical courage . . . you confronted this youth," LaMontagne's commendation said. "Upon patting him down, you recovered a fully loaded and cocked 9-mm pistol."

INVESTIGATOR PAUL Clapper received this year's PBA President's Award for his work as an undercover narcotics investigator.

"Many times while purchasing narcotics you entered and were locked inside fortified locations, were held at gunpoint, and physically searched," his award letter said.

Clapper's investigations led to the arrest of 76 suspects on 450 charges.

Investigator Frank Pallotta was presented with the Herald Medal for defusing a hostage situation in which a man held a woman and her two children at knife point on May 8, 1988.

"Through your skill and patience you were able to convince the suspect to release his hostages unharmed," his award letter said. "Subsequently, you were able to talk the suspect into turning over his weapon to you and to surrender."

OFFICER CHRISTOPHER Provo and Sgt. Robert Duchessi both were presented with PBA Merit and Valor awards for saving a woman who jumped from the state Office Building on April 27, 1988.

"Before you could reach her, the woman leaped from the window, " their commendations read. "You were able to grab her jacket, preventing her fall, while extending yourself from the window ledge. After a brief struggle you were successful at pulling the woman back through the window, undoubtedly saving her life."

INVESTIGATOR SCOTT Bodah received the Meritorious Service Award for capturing an arsonist who plagued a rehabilitated neighborhood on the city's North Side.

One victim in particular had been the victim of several arson attempts and, on Aug. 9, 1988, Bodah hid himself in that home and waited for the arsonist to strike.

"This arrest brought to a successful conclusion this investigation which resulted in the removal of a serious threat to the community," Bodah's citation notes.

OFFICER BERNARD T. Holtman was presented with the department's Distinguished Service Medal for disarming an enraged woman armed with a meat cleaver and butcher knife.

Holtman was on patrol duty on Nov. 22, 1988 when he was dispatched to a domestic disturbance on the city's West Side.

"You grabbed the suspect and began to wrestle with her. The entire time the struggle ensued, the woman held onto the knives, slashing at your head and face," Holtman's citation says.

Nine firefighters were honored for heroism.

For saving the life of 10-month-old Brian Baker on June 15, 1988, Firefighter Robert J. Brazell Jr. was presented the Francis Hendricks Award for heroism.

When firefighters arrived at 216 Westcott St., they heard a woman screaming that her baby was still inside the burning two-story building.

"Without hesitation, firefighter Brazell and his search team partner entered the burning structure," Brazell's commendation said. "They entered a bedroom on the second floor, and while conducting a systematic search, Firefighter Brazell found young Brian Baker in a crib. He picked the victim up and carried him outside. The baby was not breathing and CPR was started.

"The courage, prompt actions and skill in search and rescue procedures demonstrated by Firefighter Brazell prevented a tragic fatality."

FIRE CAPT. Dennis F. Coty received the Arthur Jenkins Award for pulling Earl Hitchcock from a burning building and trying to revive him on March 10, 1988.

Hitchcock later died at University Hospital.

"Captain Coty demonstrated courage, tenacity and professionalism in rescuing an unconscious victim from a perilous situation," Coty's citation said.

Fire Lt. John T. Cowin and Firefighter Robert J. Chace were presented with department medals of honor.

Chace was cited for rescuing 5-year-old Jimmy Merritt when his home at 229 W. Adams St. caught fire on Nov. 17, 1988. After pulling the boy out of the smoke-filled building and handing him over to ambulance workers, Chace returned to the building and rescued the child's unconscious mother, Nadine Gadson.

COWIN WAS honored for rescuing Capt. David Johnson during a fire at 714 Oswego St. on Oct. 18, 1988.

Shortly after he entered the smoke-filled building, Johnson's air line became disconnected. Cowin located Johnson, who, lacking oxygen, had become disoriented in the thick smoke, and shared his own air supply with him while leading the captain out of the building.

Firefighters Robert J. Mullen and Richard F. Buck also were presented with awards of valor for aiding in Johnson's rescue.

Capt. Donald W. Johnson was honored for leading a trapped woman to safety when fire raged through the Roosevelt Arms Apartments, 1445 S. Salina St. on Feb. 27, 1988.

FIREFIGHTERS MICHAEL J. Dineen and Scott F. McClurg were presented with valor awards for attempted rescue of a 32-year-old man at a fire at 511-513 Bryant Ave. on Nov. 1, 1988.

The two firefighters were searching the smoke-filled building when they found the unconscious body of Paul Miller in the attic. The two carried Miller out of the building and he was taken to University Hospital where he later died.

Headline: FIREFIGHTERS HURT IN APARTMENT BLAZE

Subhead:

Reporter: By John Doherty Staff Writer

Series:

Type:

Day: Tuesday

Dateline:

Publication date: 10/18/1988

Text: Two firefighters were injured today while battling an apartment blaze above a West Side tavern.

Fire Capt. David Johnson and firefighter Richard Buck both suffered from smoke inhalation and were taken to University Hospital where they remained overnight for observation. Johnson was listed in good condition today, and Buck was listed in fair condition, according to a hospital nursing official.

Johnson passed out when he lost part of his breathing gear inside the building, said fire Lt. Michael Gallagher.

"The captain lost his face piece in the smoke and had to be dragged out," Gallagher said.

The two-alarm fire on the second floor of 714 Oswego St. began shortly before 1 a.m., when fire broke out in the southeast corner of the 100-foot-long building, Gallagher said. About 35 firefighters fought the blaze, he said.

Fire damage was limited to the second floor and attic of the wood-framed building, Gallagher said.

Fire investigators were to probe through the building today to determine the cause of the fire. Several occupants of the building had already evacuated the building when firefighters arrived, Gallagher said. None of the residents was injured, he said.

"We did a search and didn't find anyone," Gallagher said.

Fire damage was limited to the upper floors of the building.

"The fire got into the attic, and they had to cut two large vent holes to get to the flames," Gallagher said.

Several stores and a tavern, Mike's Bar, are located on the first floor of the building located near the intersection of Oswego and Shonnard streets. The first floor was damaged by water, Gallagher said.