

# StarTribune

## *Never too old for home*

Article by: [GAIL ROSENBLUM](#), Star Tribune Updated: December 6, 2008 - 2:37 PM

***Frustrated that teenagers in foster care have been on "nobody's radar" for too long, two adoption advocates have opened an agency to find permanent families for children ages 10 and older.***



**Kate Kline, 54, never was one of those people who dreamed of becoming a parent. She never discounted the possibility either. But she couldn't have predicted decades ago that she would become a mother at 52, nor that her "children" would come in the packages they came in: Leah, 13, became her legal daughter a little more than a year ago; She's in the process of adopting son, Deagan, 17. ~ photo Tom Wallace, Star Tribune**

Kate Kline doesn't need friends or co-workers to point out the obvious. Her own mother did.

"Isn't this the age when parents want to get rid of their kids for a few years?" Kline's mother asked her. Kline, 54, sinks into the comfortable couch of her family room in northeast Minneapolis and laughs. "You do have to be a different kind of parent," says Kline, the newly adoptive mother of 14-year-old Leah and, soon, 17-year-old son Deagan. Both teens have spent most of their lives in foster care. "With teenagers," says Kline, who is single, "they're adults one minute and 5-year-olds the next."

Kline prefers it that way. "There's a time in a kid's life when they move from believing everything you say to becoming critical thinkers about the world. They're a little more smart-ass about stuff. That's when they get interesting."

Jen Braun hopes others feel the same way. Last month Braun, who has a master's degree in counseling and has spent 15 years working with teens and families in adoption and foster care, and Michelle Chalmers, a social worker who was placed in foster care as a teenager, opened Ampersand Families. The nonprofit agency, housed in the historic Casket Arts building in northeast Minneapolis, has one ambitious goal: to get children 10 and up out of foster care and into permanent adoptive homes -- quickly.

"There's a lack of a sense of urgency [with these kids]," says Braun, noting that some of her "kids" are 18 or older. In fact, 94 out of every 100 kids ages 15 to 17 in the state's guardianship "age out" of foster care before finding a permanent family, a reality she and Chalmers hope to change. "The child welfare system is swamped," Braun says, "with too few resources and too many children in need of healing."

Still, the duo are ready for the many questions likely to fly their way: Can't adopting a teenager be particularly difficult? (Probably). Will my grocery bills increase? (Absolutely.) Will we get financial assistance to help us do this? (Yes.)

But, mostly: Isn't it just too late?

"The difference between foster care and adoption," Chalmers says, "is like the difference between living together and getting married. There's an inheritance; a legitimate claim to a family. There's a grounding that comes from legal familial ties." It's a grounding, she says, that one never stops needing.

### *'Life is chill'*

Kline, a labor relations specialist, never pined for parenthood. In and out of relationships over the years, she considered motherhood from time to time, before life took off in another direction. She met Braun and Chalmers when they were running the Homecoming Project, a five-year, federally funded program focused on placing older children in permanent homes. They placed 57 percent of teens referred to them. The adoption rate for teens before their program was launched: 7 percent. Now the grant has ended, Braun says, "and there is still a great need for this work to be done in Minnesota."

Kline was intrigued. She met Leah at a coffee shop in early July 2007. Leah, who had been in and out of foster and family homes for years, longed for permanence. She liked Kline right away. They e-mailed constantly for weeks, went to the zoo and movies. A month later, in time to settle in before a new school year, Leah moved into Kline's three-bedroom townhouse. Leah got her own room to decorate as she liked. "Life is chill," she says.

Kline is finalizing the adoption of Deagan, 17, who joined the family in March. Deagan was in the state's care for almost 11 years, including five foster homes, one residential treatment center and one shelter.

Kline is quickly learning their personal tastes and styles. Deagan arrived "with one box, a plastic garbage bag and not enough socks to get through the week." Leah came with "boxes and boxes and boxes of stuff." Deagan called Kline "Mom" from the day he moved in. Leah needed longer. He loves video games. She's a voracious reader who devours the "Bloody Jack" series and read all seven Harry Potter books in under two weeks.

Kline runs a tight ship, equal parts love and expectations. They're expected to check in with Kline when they arrive home from school. They eat dinner at the kitchen table every night, even if it's

McDonald's. (Her grocery bill, by the way, has grown to \$300 a trip.) Then it's time for homework. Weekends begin with house-cleaning. Deagan loads and unloads the dishwasher, Swiffers and scrubs the bathrooms. Leah does trash and recycling, and vacuums -- the most detested chore, says Kline.

But their lives are hardly all work. In warmer weather, they take walks and swim in the community pool. Kline bought them a Wii; Leah used cat-sitting money to buy a Playstation. Both teens have iPods and cell phones, although Deagan has lost his phone privileges until his grades come up. Kline monitors computer time, too, including MySpace. "There is a lot of structure," she says, "but not rigidity."

Leah, who went to eight schools before becoming a teenager, is starting to make friends and have sleepovers. Deagan just played Nicely Nicely in his high school's production of "Guys and Dolls."

### *'These kids are angry'*

Heartwarming, yes. But Braun is quick to acknowledge that adopting a teenager, just like raising the one already in your house, may be fraught with challenges. Birth parents' rights must be legally terminated, which can be heartbreaking for kids who may not understand it's for the best. Even in the direst situations, teens have some happy memories of, and loyalty to, their birth parents. That may mean difficulty in connecting with another adult, or choosing not to change their name or call their adoptive parent Mom or Dad. "You may never hear the words, 'I love you,'" Braun says.

Teens who've been in foster care for long stretches don't always know how to correctly brush their teeth, or that they should change their socks every day. They may struggle with reference points in time, unable to grasp concepts like "last week," "last year" or how long they lived in a particular place. Personal safety is a concern, too. "They may think nothing of putting their full name and address on a social networking site," Braun says.

Teens may fall into and out of psychiatric care or even jail. Many are angry. Braun speaks from experience: Two years ago, she and her partner adopted their son, Roger, now 18. When Roger was 11, the police removed him and his siblings from his home and placed them in foster care. "The reasons are not pretty," Braun says. Not surprisingly, Roger was an angry kid, Braun says. They adopted him the day before his 17th birthday. Today, Roger writes poetry, attends college and plans to become a nurse. "I'm not resilient," he tells Braun. "I'm durable."

Kline and her kids are excitedly planning for Christmas together. Deagan's wish list is three pages long, he says, "with columns and sections." Kline's gifts, of course, have already arrived. "People think you probably always wanted a kid and it didn't happen, so you decided to adopt," she says. "But with people who adopt teens, it's about being able to be part of the community that holds children in a valued place. It's about helping them reach their potential. And when they put their head on their pillow at night, it's their pillow."

## **MORE INFO**

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