

VARIETY

## 'Annie' is helping Minnesota foster kids find forever families

The Ordway and Ampersand Families are teaming up to reach caring adults.

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It's hard to top the uplifting finale of "Annie," where the plucky orphan finds abiding love with Daddy Warbucks, as well as opulent digs, smart clothes, warm meals instead of cold mush, and the cutest scruffy dog east of the Mississippi.

Sit down, cynics. We know the musical is make-believe.

But the message is real. Kids, no matter how old, never stop wishing for a loving forever family.

That truth has led to a unique collaboration between St. Paul's Ordway Center for the Performing Arts and [Ampersand Families](https://ampersandfamilies.org/) (<https://ampersandfamilies.org/>), a Twin Cities area adoption agency specializing in finding permanent homes for children ages 10 and older.

Audiences at "[Annie](https://ordway.org/event/annie/)," (<https://ordway.org/event/annie/>) which runs through Dec. 31 (<https://ordway.org/>), will find a staffed Ampersand Families information table in the lobby, informational signs throughout the hall and a brief video playing before Act II, revealing the "hard-knock life" facing more than 11,000 children and teens living in foster care in Minnesota.

About 10 percent of those in the state's foster care system are "state wards," meaning that their parents' rights were terminated due to abuse and neglect, said Ampersand Families executive director Michelle Chalmers.

"All of those kids have the right to belong to a permanent, legal family," she said, "but the odds of being adopted after about age 6 go down every year."

Of those aging out of foster care at adulthood, fully half will not have finished high school. They are dramatically more likely than their non-fostered peers to face homelessness.

These grim statistics made Chalmers hesitant at first to partner with the Ordway. She didn't want to minimize the seriousness of the real foster-care experience — "not a lot of singing and dancing about chores" — nor did she want to cheat Ordway audiences of the joy of this beloved show. (No worries there. It's delightful.)

But potentially reaching 49,000 people during the show's run was mighty tempting.

"For our youth," she said, "the sun really only comes out tomorrow when an actual adult commits to helping make life better."

This heartwarming Christmas tale began nearly a year ago, driven by the Ordway's president and CEO, Jamie Grant.

While still living in Austin, Texas, Grant golfed on Sundays with a lawyer buddy who offered his services regarding children in the Texas foster care system.

"I would pick him up on Sunday mornings and, on the way to the golf course, he would unload all the stuff that had happened to him that week on kids' behalf," Grant said. "I was shocked."

That friend and his wife visited the Twin Cities in 2016, and the couples brainstormed ways to bring awareness of the foster care issue to Minnesota. Grant was referred to Ampersand Families and a partnership was born.

Chalmers quickly moved past concern to gratitude to the Ordway for producing the video, designing and printing full-color program inserts, even meeting with the Department of Human Services to make sure statistics were accurate.

"That one nonprofit would leverage its reach this way to help another nonprofit raise awareness was extraordinary to me," she said.



Donald McFarland and son Tyler Quaaas-McFarland, 17, are featured in the video before Act II of Annie.

What: General information session

Learn more about adoption and 'buddy families' initiative to train 'buddy families' for a one-year commitment to provide support to an adoptive family. Lend an ear, offer monthly respite or an occasional meal.

When: 6 p.m. Jan. 9.

Where: Sunrise Bank Bridge Meeting Room, 2525 Wabash Av., St. Paul.

Information: [info@ampersandfamilies.org](mailto:info@ampersandfamilies.org).

Since its founding nine years ago, Ampersand Families ([ampersandfamilies.org](https://ampersandfamilies.org) (<https://ampersandfamilies.org/>)) has been associated with more than 115 adoptions involving children ages 10 and older. Most are at least 13, and are disproportionately kids of color. Some are sibling groups.

Chalmers, who aged out of foster care herself and has been a foster parent, is ready for the common question: Why work so hard to find homes for kids on the cusp of launching?

“The difference between foster care and adoption,” she said, “is like the difference between living together and getting married. There’s an inheritance; a legitimate claim to a family.”

It’s a grounding, she said, that one never stops needing.

Tyler Quaas-McFarland, a 17-year-old senior at the FAIR School in Minneapolis, is featured in the Ordway video with his adoptive father, Donald McFarland. Tyler moved from foster care into McFarland’s Robbinsdale home two years ago, but the adoption was finalized just a year ago.

He thought “Annie” was “really, really good.” And it did hit home. Tyler remembers being in a shelter, “wishing to get out, feeling like there might not be anybody there for me.” But the born optimist trusted Ampersand “to find the right person for me,” and it did.

Before adopting Tyler, Donald McFarland immersed himself in seminars, read books and met with other parents.

“Because I worked really hard, there weren’t a lot of surprises,” he said. Yet, he’s candid that, even today, he seeks out Ampersand’s support and guidance.

Parents do need to be ready, Chalmers said. “When you adopt in this way, you are running a home to help a kid heal. It’s really important that adults understand themselves. If you need lots of external affirmation from your kid, this is a really bad idea. If you don’t accept help because you’re overly confident, this is a really bad idea.”

Chalmers and Grant are hopeful, though, that a curious, well-suited family or two will step up at the Ordway to ask questions and pick up materials.

“Getting adopted out of foster care does not guarantee unicorns and rainbows,” Chalmers said. “But it does give youth an adult who has committed to walking beside them, increasing the odds for a youth who is otherwise at risk for terrible outcomes.”

Grant said, “Our job is to put on shows. But as we head into the holiday season, I’ve got to think that creating awareness about this issue is a good thing.”

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Gail Rosenblum covers trends, social issues and the complexities of human relationships. Author of "A Hundred Lives Since Then: Essays on Motherhood, Marriage, Mortality and More."

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