The first day of forever'

Adoption day finds 13 foster children permanent homes
By TODD GUILD

When she was 11, Lani Almond met a girl who would become her first daughter.

Almond, now 27, said she was coaching a basketball team when she met 11-year-old Elizabeth, who was living in a foster home. Elizabeth and her sister became Almond's foster children.

Her experience with the foster care system and with adoption did not end there.

She would go on to exponentially grow their somewhat unconventional family twice more.

"There are so many kids in this community who need homes," she said. "We've been so blessed to be able to do something to help.

"To help bring these kids into a loving environment and give them a chance at happiness sits in my heart forever," she said.

The already teenaged Almond family got even bigger on Friday, when Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Kelly Connolly signed the adoption papers of Winter, 4, and Weston, 6.

"With the stroke of a pen," Connolly said in a courtroom packed with family, friends and Westons' entire second-grade class.

Winter (left) and Weston Almond were officially adopted Friday in Watsonville at the Santa Cruz County Superior Court.

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The power of words

Third annual reading day held at Starlight Elementary
By JOHANNA MILLER

The power of words was on full display at Starlight Elementary School on Friday.

Students, teachers and volunteers gathered at the school Friday morning to celebrate "Libro a Vez/One Book at a Time," a day-long reading event that aims to increase literacy rates and encourage a love of reading.

"It's about bringing children and adults together to read," said Joy Greene, a teacher at ECHO Academy.

"We've had a great turnout this year," said Greene. "I think about 60 percent of our students have already signed up.

"The students have been so excited about it," she said. "They can't wait to read the books.

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Holiday food drive kicks off
By TARMO HANNULA

Second Harvest Food Bank of Watsonville has entered its most intensive two months of the year, when it encourages the community to donate the food and funds that support its efforts to feed those in need.

On Friday, Watsonville High School's ECHO Academy teamed up with Starlight Elementary School to collect donations for the food bank.

"We're excited to spread the holidays of giving," said ECHO Academy student president, a teacher at ECHO Academy.

"I think about 60 percent of youth who have signed up are here. It's amazing.

"The students have been so excited about it," she said. "They can't wait to read the books.

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Watsonville Police Sgt. Donny Thul investigates the scene of a crash where a man in a wheelchair died after allegedly being struck by the pickup shown (above) on Main Street at East Lake Avenue early Friday.

Students from Watsonville High's ECHO Academy read to groups of children at Starlight Elementary School on Friday.

"It gets them out of their comfort zone," she said, "while also showing them how rewarding working with children can be."

Another individual at the event was Starlight Art-Ed and after-school program teacher Mariah Gutierrez. A former member of ECHO Academy herself who went through the academy's internships program, Gutierrez was inspired to work with children by experiencing similar events such as "Confetti: A Youth Art Project at a Time For the arts".

"I've met kids here who obviously weren't into school," Gutierrez said. "But then those kids from their community come back into here, and they get interested. That connection is so important."

the economic recovery has not done as much for working families, and expensive housing continues to strain people's budgets. So high numbers of local individuals and families will rely on help from the food bank.

FOOD drive co-chairs Jess Brown and Maritina O'Sullivan take the stage at the "Be A Hunger Hero" kick off for Second Harvest Food Bank's Holiday Food & Fund Drive 2017.

Lani Almand talks about adopting kids into her family.

ADOPTION

"You are not parents and children."

Almanac's signature put an official stamp on a process that began in May 2016, when Weston and Winter decided the Almendado family will adopt this child and the boy declared, "I'm not leaving!" Lani Almand smiled.

"They are beautiful and wonderful kids that were meant for me," she said. "This is the first day of forever," she added.

The Almendado family was part of Santa Cruz County's first Natural Adoption. When 13 foster children became the official members of their own families, the Almendado family stepped forward to adopt National Adoption Month, and the Almendado family stepped forward to adopt National Adoption Month.

that begins when young people are torn into the child welfare system.