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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT AND THE FIRST LADY AT ADOPTION EVENT

Presidential Hall

10:00 A.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you, and please be seated. And welcome to the White House for a celebration and a wonderful announcement for so many children and families around our country.

I'm delighted that we've been joined by members of Congress, including Senator Carl Levin and Representative Dave Camp and Representative Nancy Johnson and Representative Tom DeLay and Representative Ben Cardin and Representative Maxine Waters.

This is an issue that has been at the real heart of our efforts in the last several years to do what we could to give every child a chance to have a permanent loving home.

And there are many people who have played a role in bringing us to this day. I want to acknowledge Olivia Golden and Pat Montoya, from HHS. I want to acknowledge the Brown, the Manis, the Keane and the Vasquez family. Carol Williams, the former Children's Bureau director and a champion of adoption; the many adoption advocates who are here.

And there's one very special champion of foster children who I would like to introduce to you. She is an eight-year-old girl who heard about how many foster children could not afford to use anything but garbage bags for luggage when they were told they had to move. So she decided to collect suitcases for them, and so far she has collected 1,000. And I'd like to ask MacKenzi Snyder to stand, please. (Applause.)

This summer I saw a photograph that reminded me why the work we're doing to promote adoption in our country is so vitally important. It was a picture of a young woman in a green silk evening gown, with high heels and a lace shawl, and you could see the anticipation and excitement in her eyes. That was a picture of 17-year-old Deanna Collins. It was taken by her parents, her adoptive parents, on the night of her high school prom.

Looking at that picture, it was difficult for me to believe that the smiling, confident young woman was the same girl I had welcomed to the White House just four years ago. Back then, she was 13, and she'd already spent eight years in foster care. With her shoulders slumped forward, and her eyes downcast, she told the audience gathered in the East Room for National Adoption Month about her dreams of living in a place she could call home, with a room of her own and a family she could love.

Not long after that visit, Deanna's dream came true. And it's been my privilege to watch this young woman's life transformed by her adoption. With the love of her parents and the confidence that comes from knowing that, indeed, she always will have a place to call home, no matter what else happens to her in life, she is thriving. She's a senior in high school, now, and plans to go to college and major in social work.

Every time I need inspiration for our fight to strengthen and increase adoption in America, I think of Deanna. I think of so many of the other children whom I've know. I think of the adult adoptees, who are telling us their stories, including Washington D.C.'s own Mayor, Tony Williams, who told us at another Adoption Month commemoration last year how, at the age of three, he was about to be declared unadoptable, and institutionalized by the state, when Virginia Williams opened her arms and welcomed him into her family.

Mrs. Williams is here today, and all of us are grateful for the love you gave that young three-year-old boy, and the second chance you gave to him. And I'd like to ask Mrs. Williams to please stand. (Applause.)

But we can't gather today and celebrate Dianna or Mayor Williams without thinking of the thousands of foster children in America who are still waiting for the same chance, either to go back safely to their own families where they will be given the love and the attention and the discipline that every child needs, or be given the chance in a new family.

For more than 25 years, as an advocate and an attorney, I have tried to work with so many others to address the challenges of foster care and adoption. I've represented perspective parents in court. I've represented foster children. I've worked on behalf of changes in legislation. I've listened to the frustrations that social workers and judges and police officers and parents and others feel about the red tape that so often keeps them from sharing their lives with children who badly need their love.

I've met foster children who have spent childhoods feeling alone and unloved, moving from home to home. Children such as the teenage boy the President and I met in the Oval Office two years ago. When we asked him where he lived, he looked down and he said, "All over Fairfax County."

In many ways, giving more of our children the chance to know the love and support of a family is a personal crusade for us. I know that many of you have been at the meetings and the roundtables and the celebrations of National Adoption Month that we've held here at the White House. And I've been very pleased and grateful to work with so many advocates like Wendy's founder, or Dave Thomas, who as an adopted child himself has dedicated much of his time and personal resources to promoting adoption.

With each meeting I became, along with all of you, more and more convinced that it was past time to reform our foster care system, to identify and eliminate the obstacles to change the placement procedures so that we could expedite the movement of children either home or into new homes.

We've made a lot of progress. We've helped adoptive parents carve out the time they need to care for their new children. The first bill the President signed into law was the Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows new parents -- including adoptive parents -- to take time off and care for their children without fear of losing their jobs or health insurance.

We've put an end to racial discrimination in adoption. The President signed and strengthened the Multiethnic Placement Act, prohibiting adoption agencies from keeping children of one race from the safe and loving arms of parents of another. We have made adoptions more affordable, putting in place tax credits for new adoptive families. And we're taking steps to use the Internet to help match waiting children with loving homes.

And most importantly, we've crafted legislation to dramatically reduce the amount of time a child spends in foster care. We've said that no child would have to wait longer than 12 months -- down from 18 months -- before the court considered his or her permanent placement. For the first time, we have offered states financial incentives to move more children out of foster care and into permanent homes. And we have given states the flexibility to try new strategies to accomplish that goal.

And we set an ambitious national goal of doubling the number of children adopted annually, from 28,000 to 56,000, by the year 2002. And though there were some

moments when it looked like it wouldn't pass, we fought hard to make the Adoption and Safe Families Act the law of the land in 1997. In a few minutes, the President will offer new evidence of our continued success.

But we still have more to do. Two weeks after the President signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, I went to California to meet with a group of young people, who were aging or had already aged out of foster care. They told me about their struggles -- about being forced out of foster homes on their 18th birthdays; about living in homeless shelters, seeking sleep in emergency rooms while trying to finish school; about getting sick and having no one to turn to for medical care or comfort. These young people are our responsibility. We cannot ignore the potential of any one of these children.

One of the young women I met that day in California is now a student at the Yale Law School. And that's why I was pleased to announce a new proposal in the President's balanced budget, to help former foster children make the transition to independence. And I'm very happy that the House, under the bipartisan leadership of Representative Nancy Johnson and Representative Ben Cardin, both of whom are with us today, has passed the bill that will allow former foster children to remain on Medicaid until age 21 and will -- (applause) -- and will give them the extra help they need to finish high school, find work and a place to live.

Now I would call on the Senate to take action on the companion bill that is sponsored by Senators Chafee and Rockefeller. There is no reason we cannot pass this bill this year for the good of all of our children. And I hope every one of us here will do everything we can to make sure that the Senate does that, and then we can have, I think, another celebration to sign a bill that will make such a difference in the lives of older children in foster care.

The progress we celebrate today is due to the work of countless people, and many of you are here, and others are working on the front lines around our country and others are caring for children who are newly adopted in their homes.

I remember very well that a few years ago on Mothers Day, we had a roundtable for mothers and their adopted children. And at the end of the discussion, I went around the room asking the children if they had anything else to say, because some of them had not yet spoken up, and I didn't want them to leave and not have been heard. The final boy to speak looked up at the woman sitting next to him and said quietly, "I just want to thank my mother."

With that simple statement, and that adoring look, he summarized what all of us had been trying to say all afternoon. So, to all of those of you who have been the mothers and fathers that have helped move our children into homes, and into a sense of love and security, we say thank you -- for opening your homes and your hearts.

And now it's my privilege to introduce someone who has done just that -- who

with her husband, Steven, and her son Sean, have just finalized the adoptions of Sarah and Brian. Please join me in welcoming Dawn Keane. (Applause.)

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. When we have events here in this room, with people who have come to share their experiences, very often I feel like a fifth wheel. I think everything that needs to be said has already been said. (Laughter.) But I want to begin by thanking Dawn Keane for her wonderful statement; her husband, Steve; and Sean, Brian and Sarah. They're beautiful children. They did a good job at the microphone, didn't they? (Laughter.) I want to thank Olivia Golden and Pat Montoya for their work at HHS on this important issue.

I'd like to thank this remarkable bipartisan delegation from the House of Representatives here -- Dave Camp and Nancy Johnson and Ben Cardin and Maxine Waters, Sandy Levin and Congressman DeLay. This may be the only issue all six of these people agree on. (Laughter.) And -- Tom's nodding his head up and down. (Laughter.)

I'll tell you a funny story -- this is a true story. The other day I was reading a profile of Tom DeLay in the newspaper. And I got about halfway through, and he was giving me the devil for something; you know, he's very good at that. (Laughter.) And he started grinding on my golf game and saying that I didn't count my scores and all this, and I was getting really angry. (Laughter.) And then I get to the next part of the story, and it talks all about his experience and his commitment to adoption and to foster children, and the personal experience that he and his wife had. And my heart just melted. And all of a sudden, I didn't care what he said about my golf game. (Laughter.)

And I say that to make this point: The Keane family -- the Manis, the Brown, the Vasquez families who are behind me today -- they represent what we all know is basic and fundamental about our families and our country -- more important than anything else we can think of. And they open their homes and their hearts to children, and they open our hearts to them -- and to each other as we work for more stories like those we celebrate today.

I'd also like to say a special hello to the Badeau family. Some of you may remember this. Two years ago, almost, Sue and Hector Badeau joined us at the White House when I signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act. They brought 18 of the 22 children they have adopted. Now, you need to know that, as if they didn't have enough to deal with, this summer they also welcomed into their home a family of eight Kosovar refugees. So if you ever need proof that there's no limit to human goodness, you can look at Sue and Hector Badeau.

I'd like for them to stand. Where are they? There you go. They've got some of their kids here. Stand up. (Applause.) Thank you. God bless you. Thank you. (Applause.)

I would also like to say just a very brief word to Hillary. You heard her tell the story of her involvement in this, but when we were in law school together, before we were married, she was talking to me about how messed up the foster care and adoption laws were in the country, how many ridiculous barriers there were. And not long after we moved to Little Rock and I became Attorney General of our state, she took a case for a young couple who had had a child from foster care for three years that they desperately wanted to adopt -- this is over 20 years ago. And together they changed the law in our state so that foster parents could be considered for adoption, something that used to be verboten in most states in the country.

So I've watched her work on these issues now for almost 30 years, and I am very grateful that one of the many blessings of our time in the White House has been the chance to make a difference on these adoption and foster care issues, and I thank her for making it possible. (Applause.)

Finally, let me say, again, I want to say a special word of thanks to the members of Congress in both parties who have come to this event today. We have had a raging, often stimulating, occasionally maddening, debate on what should be the role of government over the last five years in this town. But we have all agreed that government has a role to try to protect children, but to facilitate the most rapid, reasonable, orderly process for both foster care and for transition to adoption.

Hillary said that the House had adopted this provision to let kids coming out of foster care keep their Medicaid until they're 21. I'll just give you one more example of how these issues unify us. Within a 36-hour period, about six months ago, my cousin, who runs the public housing unit in the little town where I was born in Arkansas -- which has 8,000 or 10,000 people -- came up to a HUD conference. And she spent the night with me and were having breakfast, drinking coffee, and she says, you know, you've got to do something about these foster kids. They keep going out of the -- they come out of the foster homes and they've got no money and they need to do some things. And then the next day, literally within 36 hours, I'm talking to these people from New York City who tell me it's maybe the biggest social problem they have now, with all these kids coming out of foster care.

So this is an issue that spans the experience of America, the whole sweep of it. And I'm very grateful -- I'm grateful that we have this consensus and I'm grateful that they've acted on it. I urge the Senate to follow suit.

Now, you've already heard about the things that we're doing to try to double the number of children we help move into permanent homes. We have new evidence that these efforts are bearing fruit. The Department of Health and Human Services has just given me a report that tracks our progress in meeting our adoption goals. It shows that the number of adoptions from the foster care system increased from 28,000 in 1996, to 36,000 in 1998. That is the first significant increase in adoptions since the National Foster Care Program was created almost 20 years ago.

Now, that's an amazing thing. That's more than -- it's about a 30-percent increase. That's a very impressive increase in two years. And we are well on our way to

meeting our goal of 56,000 in 2002, doubling the number. For all of you that had anything to do with that, I say thank you. You should be very proud of yourselves.

Now, if you look at this HHS report -- and I urge those of you who are interested in it to actually get it and scan it, at least -- you will see how much this bipartisan cooperation I talked about and the work that's being done by people in the trenches to clear away the barriers is making a difference -- a stunning example of what we can do when we put our children first. You will see that we have acted on each and every one of the 11 recommendations set forth in the original Adoption 2002 report. Breaking down barriers to adoptions, ensuring accountability, rewarding innovation, supporting adoptive families themselves.

One of the key recommendations we adopted into law in 1997 was to give states, for the first time, financial incentives to help children move from foster to adoptive homes. Under the new bonus system, states are entitled to up to \$4,000 or \$6,000, depending on whether the child has special needs, for each adoption above their previous average.

Today, I have the honor of presenting the first round of these awards, worth \$20 million, to 35 of our 50 states. The good news is that these states did this, using creative new approaches and exceeding their own high goals. Illinois, for example -- listen to this -- the state of Illinois increased its options by 112 percent -- 112 -- yes, you can clap for Illinois. That's good. (Applause.)

Now, the bad news, if you can call it that, is that even though we believed this would work, we didn't think it would work this well this quickly -- (laughter) -- and we didn't put enough money in to give all the states all the money to which they're entitled. So I hope we can rectify that, because I think we all think that we want to give the states the incentives to figure out how best to do this.

But the fact is, I think all of us are very proud of what these states have done for some of their most vulnerable citizens. And I look forward to working with the Congress to make up this shortfall and get the other 15 states above their goals as well.

Today, I am also awarding \$5.5 million in adoption opportunity grants to outstanding public and private organizations in 16 of our states to help fund research and new ways of increasing inter-state adoptions, and adoptions of minority children. Together these efforts will help to accelerate the remarkable progress we've seen.

Now, again let me say, I think the big goal we ought to have for this legislative session is to get the Senate to follow the lead of the House, and schedule a vote on the Chafee-Rockefeller bill to ensure that the foster children are not cast out in the cold when their time in foster care ends. I hope -- I know if we can get it up and get it on the calendar, it will pass with the same overwhelming bipartisan support that we've seen in the House. So I urge all of you to do what you can to make sure that that is a big priority for the Senate, and I will do my part.

Together, we can help our foster children -- all of them -- first grow up in good homes, and, if they turn 18 as foster children, to make a good transition from transit to independence -- with health care, education, counseling and housing.

Now, ultimately, let me say the credit in all this does not really belong to all of the political leaders, even though they've worked very hard, all of us have together. It does not belong to all the public servants, even though there is a real new attitude, I think, in the organizations, the social services organizations, to try to do the right thing and move this along.

But none of this will work if there aren't good people in every community like the Keanes, the Manises, the Browns, the Vasquezes, the Badeaus, who are willing to give a child unconditional love and a good upbringing. They are the proof of the unlimited goodness of the human heart. All the rest of us are trying to do is to unleash it. And we need to keep right on doing that.

Thank you and God bless you all. (Applause.)

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10:30 A.M. EDT

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