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Adoption During a Pandemic: A Flemington Couple Says Their Virtual Adoption Ceremony Was “A Thousand Times Better” Than Anticipated

When schools began to close their doors in response to the COVID-19 health crisis, Amy Listz’s mind immediately flew to the upcoming adoption scheduled for the spunky little 3-year-old boy she and her husband Eric had fostered since he was an infant.

After such a long wait for him to become a permanent part of their family, would this pandemic further delay the day the Flemington couple could legally call him their son, Amy Listz repeatedly asked her resource worker from the Somerset/Hunterdon/Warren Vicinage’s family division.

It wouldn’t.

The Listz family adopted their son Will on March 27 during a virtual proceeding before Warren County Superior Court Judge Haekyoung Suh. The adoption was one of thousands of court proceedings that have been conducted before hundreds of judges through Zoom, video conference and telephone conference since the Judiciary first suspended in-person court proceedings on March 15 to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Adoptions, weddings, Supreme Court hearings, civil trials and a host of other court proceedings are all continuing from the safe confines of home.

For Amy Listz, the virtual proceeding was not the ceremony she had pictured for Will’s adoption day.

“But it was a thousand times better than what I would have anticipated,” she said.

Before the pandemic, the Liszts had planned on being surrounded by family in a courtroom in Belvidere in Warren County. But the lockdowns meant no family traveling from Florida and Texas to witness the special occasion, and no party with relatives and neighbors, who quickly came to love Will and his “very large personality.” No one would see the special black T-shirts they had designed for the big occasion

But Eric Liszt, who works for a software company, had a plan. He set up a large video monitor on the wrap-around porch of the family home, and the Liszts invited neighbors and relatives to watch from a safe distance.

Some stayed in their cars, some set up their viewing spot on the front lawn. Their 17-year-old foster daughter live-streamed it over Facebook to the out-of-state relatives.

Dressed in their special black T-shirts, the family interacted directly with Judge Suh as if they had been in her courtroom. Watching were many more people than the Liszts had imagined would have gone to the courthouse.

Judge Suh asked both parents separately a series of questions relating to their intentions in adopting Will, ending with “Are you asking that the court grant this petition today?”

“Yes, I am,” Amy Lizst said, her voice cracking.

When it was over, a caravan of cars – including police and fire vehicles –paraded past the house blaring their horns. It was a different way – one necessitated by the circumstances – of celebrating Will’s permanent placement with a couple who, in addition to having two biological children, have taken in 30 children during their 10 years of fostering.

“It wound up being quite the spectacle. It was neat because everyone could participate,” Amy Liszt said. “It was really community oriented, which was cool, because who gets to see an adoption like that? In spite of everything going on, it was just something cool for people to be a part of.”

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