

A 'Minor' Miracle

Feisty foster kid to be sister's keeper

By **MELISSA KLEIN**

Every year, Merli Desrosier promised her little sister a Christmas gift better than a new doll or the latest computer game.

"She was, like, 'Don't worry. Next Christmas, you're going to be living with me,'" said Marie Estimé, who then lived with their allegedly neglectful father. "Then it kept going—'next Christmas, next Christmas.'"

Merli was practically a child herself, a teenager living in foster care and attending high school.

But this Christmas, Merli made good. Now a 25-year-old college graduate, she took in her sister, now 16, and is pursuing the unusual step of adopting her. The move will legally cement a bond that has endured through years of hardship.

"Since I was 9, it's been that way—that I'm like her mom," Merli said.

Merli's mother died four days after giving birth to Marie in 1993 because of complications from the birth and sickle cell anemia. The sisters and their brother, Yves, were shuttled between relatives and foster care before their father took them in two years later.

Merli was placed in foster care again at 16 after an argument with her father during which, she said, he tried to strangle her.

Marie and Yves stayed with their father, and Merli visited often to keep tabs on them, bringing her sister clothes and doing her hair.

Marie eventually went back to foster care. Merli continued her education, something she said her mother always stressed and she enjoyed.

"School was the only place I could be a kid, where I could be a teenager and not be a parent or an adult," she said.

Merli got a scholarship to the College of Staten Island. A financial-aid package later allowed her to attend Purchase College, and she graduated in May.

Her little sister, meanwhile, was despondent in her foster home.

"I just decided, whether or not I had a career lined up or an actual place big enough for her to live in, that I would take her in," Merli said.

Merli became Marie's foster mother, and the younger sister moved into her "mom's" Harlem studio in July.

Merli said she wanted to adopt her sister to get her out of the foster-care bureaucracy and provide her with a more normal life, one that she had promised.

But the small apartment was a roadblock, because it was not suitable for an adoption placement.

And Merli has been unable to find work in marketing or public relations, as she had hoped, and has only a part-time job at a clothing store.

The New York Foundling, the agency that oversees Marie's care, has stepped up to help with the adoption process and in securing a bigger apartment.

First, the agency asked some hard questions, to make sure Merli was in it for the long haul. Cases of siblings adopting siblings are extremely rare, with the agency overseeing just one such arrangement, out of 123 adoptions, in the last fiscal year.

"We just wanted to make sure that this was beyond a passing infatuation," said Bill



Angel Chevestt

THE GREATEST LOVE: Former foster kids Merli Desrosier (right) and her little sister, Marie Estimé, are setting up house in Brooklyn.

Baccaglioni, The Foundling's executive director. "Merli has certainly demonstrated that."

He said Merli never wavered from her goal of getting an education and one day taking in her sister.

The agency provided the security deposit and first month's rent for a two-bedroom in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. A Section 8 housing subsidy will help Merli pay the \$1,224 rent. The sisters will move into their new home in a couple of weeks. The adoption process could take up to 10 months.

Merli, Marie and their brother—now a 24-year-old college student in Florida—spent Christmas together. While Marie said she got good gifts, the holiday wasn't about presents.

"I didn't really want anything," she said, "because I already got what I wanted—which was to live with my sister."

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