

Bonds that distance can't dissolve



Trenton woman's mission: Keeping sibling ties strong despite separation

By Kelly Johnson
STAFF WRITER

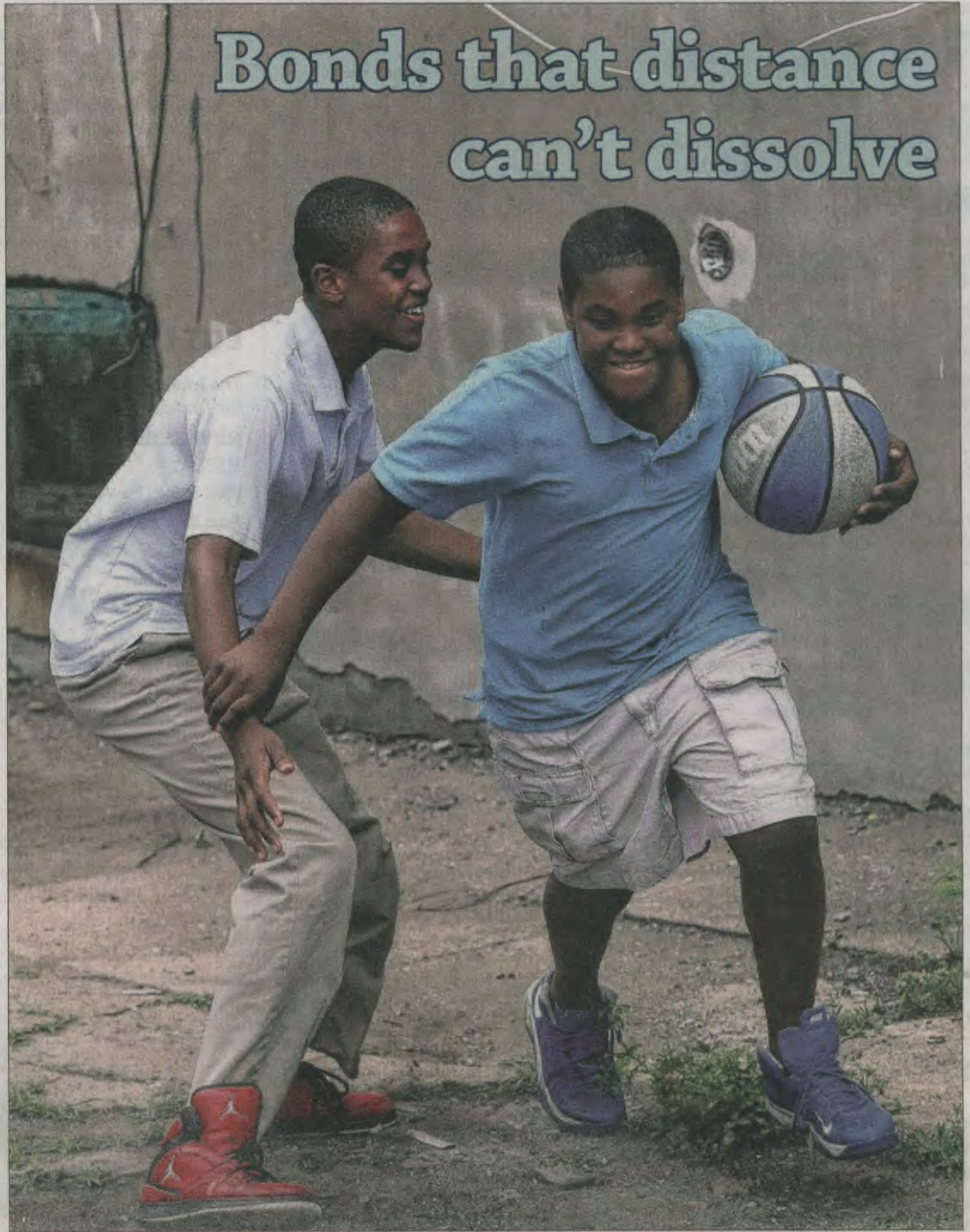
TRENTON — When Maria Jones adopted her daughter five years ago, she had what seemed like a simple request for the adoption system: for her daughter to know her biological brothers and sisters.

But Jones soon realized having her request fulfilled would be difficult. Her daughter's seven siblings gradually became separated, with some adopted and some still in the system. Her daughter, who is now 6 years old, was able to meet one of her infant sisters for an hour about four years ago, but has not seen her since and has never met any of her other siblings, Jones said.

"I adopted my daughter, and every time I look at her I know there are other children out there experiencing the same thing of never meeting their siblings," she said. "Hundreds of thousands of children fit this category."

Two years ago her experience drove the Trenton resident to start a nonprofit called the JISU Experience, or Joy in Siblings United, which aims to reunite and promote bonding between siblings, whether biological or raised together, who were separated by adoption, foster care, divorce or other factors.

Next week, she will for the



MARTIN GRIFF/THE TIMES

Brothers Tazmir and Messiah Crews, ages 13 and 12, play basketball outside their home in Trenton last Thursday. At top, Tazmir watches his sister, Princess, show off with a hula hoop. At right, the Crews siblings with their mother, Gennara, of Trenton. Tazmir was separated from his family for nearly five years when his mother sent him to live with a relative in New Orleans due to financial hardship. He returned late last year. View a gallery at photos.nj.com/the.times.

first time take 25 siblings on a five-day overnight camping trip to Camp Bernie in Port Murray, Warren County.

"This is the first time that I've been able to bring kids together," Jones said. "They all seem joyous and happy about this adventure."

Among the children are two cousins, boys age 10 and 11, who are the son and nephew of the woman who raised them from birth, she said. A year ago, the

nephew's mother decided to take back her son.

"It put a strain not only on the sisters but on the boys as well," she said.

Also headed for the camping trip are brothers Tazmir Crews, 13, and Messiah Crews, 12, neighbors of Jones who were separated for almost five years. Tazmir moved to New Orleans to live with his great-grandmother

SEE **SIBLINGS**, PAGE A09





MARTIN GRIFF/THE TIMES

The Crews siblings of Trenton — Tazmir, 13; Princess, 6; and Messiah, 12 — are together as a family for the first time in years. It's this kind of togetherness that Maria Jones hopes to promote through her organization, The Joy In Siblings United Experience in Trenton, which works to reunite and create bonding experiences for siblings that have been separated through adoption, foster care, divorce and other reasons.

Siblings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A01

when he was just a fourth-grader after his mother, Genara Crews, suffered financial hardship and wanted to move him to a better environment.

"I thought a change of pace would be great for him — just something different, outside of Trenton, outside of the negative effects of the Trenton school district," Crews said.

But she said she eventually realized the issues she was concerned about in city were also prevalent in New Orleans, and she brought her son back to Trenton to live with her, his brother and his 6-year-old sister Princess again just before the new year, she said.

Jones said she is looking forward to having the sibling groups reconnect during the trip, which will include various fun activities intended to strengthen their relationships, such as swimming, canoeing, archery and a night hike for

the older children.

"The main thing is we want children to bond with each other," Jones said. "While we want them to have fun, we'll also be focused on bonding. It's not just going and having fun; there's a mission here."

Jones, who works at the state Department of Transportation, said the camping trip was almost derailed when she was unable to obtain funding from the Department of Children and Families, but she decided to use her own money and pay the \$650 cost per child for the trip. She also is paying for shirts, backpacks, water bottles and transportation for the kids.

She said she met with officials from the Department of Children and Families earlier this year to discuss the program, and they thought that the camping trip was a great idea, even giving her suggestions. But her efforts to contact the agency for help with funding got no response, she said.

"Everybody supports you and says that you're doing a great thing, and then when you need something, you can't get it. Something as simple as, help me drive these kids," she said.

DCF spokeswoman Kristine Brown said in an e-mail that the agency supports summer camp experiences for children in foster care, but has not signed any new contract for camps this year and has not referred any children to JISU.

Even without state funding, Jones said she plans to continue her efforts to reunite siblings and offer year-round activities to maintain their bonds. She said she would also like to open an office for her organization and a facility where kids could come after school, do their homework and just hang out.

Donations are being accepted through the organization's website, jisuexp.org.

Contact Kelly Johnson at kjohnson@njtimes.com

ing? Want your house painted?

Read *Service Solutions*
every day in Classified.

The Times
nj