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Oprah on the Potomac

Stacie Scott Turner's charity makes a splash and proves she's a housewife with pull.

By Alyssa Rosenberg Published Thursday, July 01, 2010

The girls were trying to control nervous giggles—no small task with DC mayor Adrian Fenty greeting them onstage and 150 child-welfare advocates, a US senator, and BET in the audience. But when Stacie Scott Turner announced that Dell was giving laptops to the youngsters—they're girls in DC foster care whom she's taking to South Africa for a service, education, and World Cup-watching trip as part of her Extra-Ordinary Life charity—their composure vanished into a flood of hugs and exclamations. Oprah never had a more appreciative audience for a giveaway. And Turner proved that there's at least one Real Housewife of DC who can create a spectacle and draw a crowd of influential Washingtonians without crashing a party.

“We consider you our family,” she told the crowd, praising DC Child and Family Services Agency staffers and family-court judges, many of whom were in the audience. Turner herself was born into the city's foster-care system and adopted as a child. “Family isn't just the people who had you,” she said. “It's the people who care about you.”

The ad hoc family who turned out to celebrate the girls participating in the trip—the subject of an upcoming BET documentary—included Fenty, who earlier in the week had missed a campaign-education forum with his rival, DC Council chairman Vincent Gray but showed up to give the girls DC compasses for their trip. Senator Roland Burris, whom Turner got to know when she attended Howard University with his son, told the girls that “under the charge of a US senator” they have a duty to be ambassadors for all foster children. DC Family Court presiding judge William Jackson and deputy presiding judge Zoe Bush attended, as did Roque Gerald, director of Child and Family Services. Gerald told *The Washingtonian* that he hoped programs like Extra-Ordinary Life would encourage area residents to aid foster children, opening up experiences to kids in the system beyond what the agency can provide. And Barbara Harrison, the News4 anchor who created the station's Wednesday's Child feature to promote adoption (which Turner said she grew up watching) said Turner's experience—“she blossomed in a family”—was moving for her.

The composition of the audience helped underscore that despite the presence of cameras, Turner's

work is being taken seriously by the people in the District most involved in child-welfare issues from day to day.

In an interview before the event, Mindy Good, communications director for Child and Family Services, said Extra-Ordinary Life had done a thorough vetting and applications process and had trained the girls in everything from how to stay safe during foreign travel to etiquette. The girls have also pen-palled with young women who are served by the Johannesburg Child Welfare Society to learn more about South African society before the trip, and they'll do service work in Soweto. Turner said that college enrollment is a minimum requirement for the girls who participate.

Says Good: "Stacie comes from this background, as you know, and she totally gets it about these young people. The way she has set up her experience that she's providing for them, a great deal of thought and care has gone into it."

Matthew Fraidin, an associate professor at the University of the District of Columbia's law school who has focused much of his work on foster care and family law, says that while he hoped Extra-Ordinary Life would help change the lives of the girls who participate, it's important not to get sanguine about the overall state of foster care in the District.

"There are a lot of kids in DC foster care who never needed to be in foster care in the first place, and there are a lot of kids who could have gotten out and got to their families a lot earlier," Fraidin says. The majority of DC's foster children "are not going off to South Africa, and they don't have someone swooping into their lives like this. Most kids really are fending for themselves."

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