

**AAN's Very First Adoption**

# Celebrating the Life of Derek

**Derek** Thomas, son of Chet and Sherri, passed from this life on February 1, 2007 at the age of 26. Derek came from Florida and was the very first placement for Adopt America Network 25 years ago.

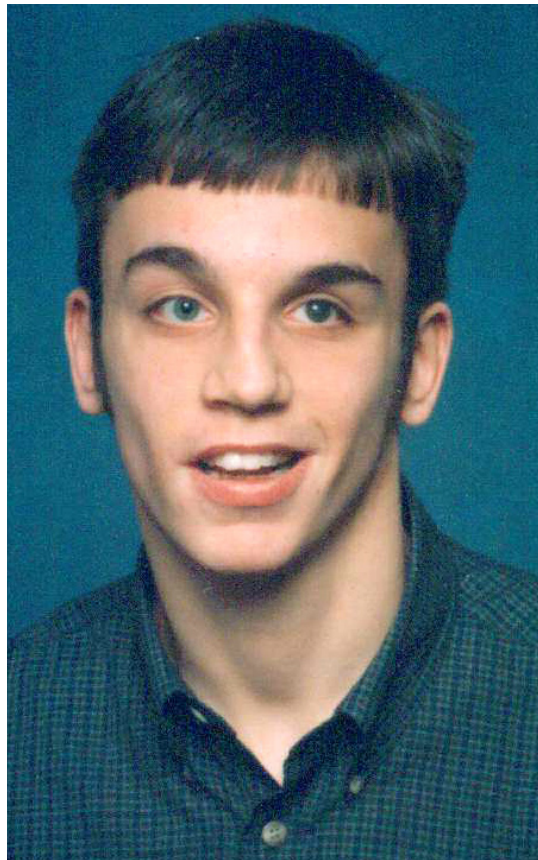
Chet and Sherri were also the very first family AAN registered. Chet was finishing religious studies, Sherri was taking care of their two-year old girl, Manya. With the help of AAN's staff, they found Derek. When he was 5 weeks old he suffered brain damage, resulting in mental retardation and a seizure disorder.

Derek came home to his new, permanent family when he was four years old, still taking a bottle, pacifier and eating baby food. Sherri and Chet were told it was questionable whether he would ever walk or talk. How he proved everybody wrong!! After only a few weeks of tender, loving care by his family, he was walking and beginning to talk.

In 2002, Derek graduated from Wood Lane School and moved to their residential home. His family, and especially his sisters – Manya, Kathryn, and Laura, visited the group home very often and played games or shared a meal with Derek and his friends. "Derek never met a stranger," Sherri remembers. He really enjoyed living at the residential home, participating in Special Olympics and entertaining everyone during the home's talent shows.

Derek taught the entire family, especially his sisters, the life lesson that disabilities were nothing to look down on – or to be afraid of. Adoption Team Leader Beverly Moore knew Derek almost from the beginning. Seeing him grow and evolve over the years, she has fond feelings for Derek.

"He was so blessed with a great family. He was quite a guy. He was just so happy and busy." She particularly enjoyed seeing him as a young adult performing on stage in the commemorative video his family made. At the visitation, she witnessed first-hand the large number of people who had grown close to Derek and appreciated him.



Elaine Bodi, Director of Accounting, was a volunteer back then and baby sat for Derek a few times. "His smile was infectious and heartwarming. I remember looking at him in awe. Here was this child with such a rough start in life, whose every step required all his concentration and physical strength, and he just had this beaming smile." She attended Derek's funeral and shared the following observations.

"The mission of AAN was accomplished in this young man. How wonderful for Derek that he had a family who will miss him ... a Mom and Dad, sisters, a whole extended family, a large group of friends and numerous caregivers. All these people had attended to his special needs and became better people for it. He had parents who not only loved him but were advocates for him for the rest of his life. He had sisters who played with him and teased him and whom

he teased back. He surpassed all his early expectations for what he would become. He didn't die alone and he didn't die forgotten. He was a joy to others and he died being loved."

Adopt America recognizes Derek's family for providing a special person, Derek, with a special family of his own. We celebrate his accomplishments, the very special young man he became, and the lasting impression he has made on all our hearts.



## How You Can Help

Adopt America Network has helped place over 3,500 children with loving families in the last 25 years – 909 in the last 4 years without charging fees to families. You can help in two ways:

- Share your love, talents and time by adopting a child and giving them a family of their own to whom they belong.
- Donate to Adopt America Network so that we may help more waiting children find their forever family that they deserve.



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Please visit [www.adoptamericanetwork.org](http://www.adoptamericanetwork.org) to learn more about the 129,000 children who through no fault of their own have been abused, abandoned or neglected. They wait on average over 3 years in the U.S. foster care system for someone to pick them out and cherish them.