Almost exactly two years ago, Arkansans voted in Act One, legislation banning unmarried couples from fostering or adopting children.

In April, a judge said it was unconstitutional and soon we could have a decision about it from the state supreme court.

It's a controversial topic with strong feelings on both sides, but no matter how you feel about act 1, everyone agrees; the need for foster and adoptive homes is ever present.

KARK 4 takes an in-depth look at that need through the eyes of one remarkable young man.

"Every time I meet someone I feel like I've known them my entire life," said Shaden Jedlicka.

Shaden Jedlicka is a talker. he easily opens up, about his life, about his classes at the U of A Fort Smith, about his family.

But he hasn't always been this way.

"All together I have been in four shelters and three foster homes," Jedlicka said.

Shadon is a foster kid. His mother physically and mentally abused him when he was 9, the state took him away.

"My experience away from home was actually better than my home life," said Jedlicka.

He was in and out of foster care, sometimes back with his biological parents, by his early teens he had started to slip away.

"Right after I was removed from my dad's home, that was my give up point."

Shaden's story is not unlike many foster children.

There are more than 4,000 foster children in the state.

And only 1,800 foster and adoptive homes.
The average age to enter the system is seven-years-old and the likelihood for adoption or a permanent foster home slips away as the child gets older.

Last year, 233 children aged out of the system, never having been adopted.

Shaden was separated from his seven brothers and sisters. He rarely speaks to his biological parents. He had almost nothing, he says, until he turned 16.

"My final foster home was the best thing that's ever happened to me. When I was 16 I met Jack and Penny Jedlicka," Shaden said.
Jack and Penny, or as Shaden calls them now, Mom and Dad.

It was almost like love at first sight.

"We just really connected, by the time he moved in, he was just like ours," said Penny Jedlicka.

It was the first time he'd ever had a pet, the first time someone had cared enough to break his barriers.

"My mom told me one time, you aren't going anywhere, so you might as well give up and I was like, okay, this is the point in my life where I have finally found what I was looking for," he said.

And at a critical age, Shaden changed. He got more involved in school and other activities, started to excel.

"It's like a day and night thing, one day I remember being depressed and one day, I remember being myself! And if people like me and if they don't, I really don't care because I have a family that cares about me," Shaden said.

Since, he's taken his forever family's last name. He's still in the foster system but only until he finishes school.

He wants to be a teacher and a mentor to other foster children. He's already making a name for himself.

But he doesn't want his story to be unique. Because he says, every foster child should have their own Jack and Penny, their own forever family.

Links