

# A BACHELOR WITH 31 ADOPTED KIDS

*Kojo Odo has opened his doors to some of the country's neediest children*

**T**WELVE years ago, **Kojo M. Odo**, a single, Harlem-born former teacher with close family roots in Virginia and who was spurred by both his deep love for children and his political beliefs, decided to adopt a child. He knew exactly what he wanted — a healthy, Black boy three-to-six years old. Instead, he got a seven-year-old boy with one arm who insisted on being named **Kojo M. Odo Jr.**

Things worked so well between the two that **Kojo Sr.** decided to adopt another child, then another, then another, and others until the **Odo** family now consists of 31 legally adopted children — 25 boys and six girls. Their ages range from seven to 24 years. All came to him either emotionally or physically handicapped or both.

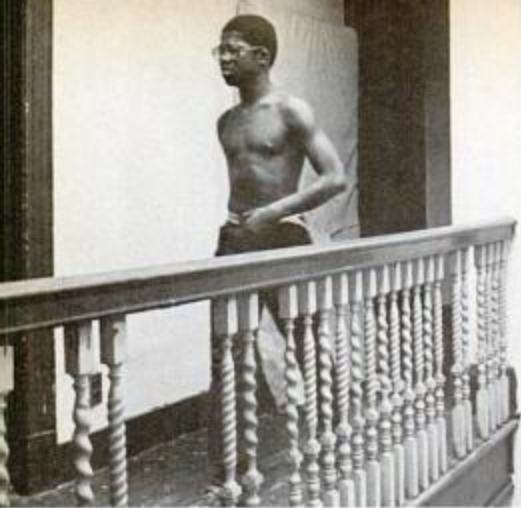
The family, which lived in a nine-bedroom brownstone on tree-lined

Striver's Row in central Harlem, recently moved to Columbus, Ohio, after **Odo** was hired to administer the Ohio Department of Human Services' special needs adoption program. All of the children have African-inspired names beginning with the letter "K." The boys are Konata (also called Muata), 24; Kapeni and Kwaku, both 20; Kwende, Kwabena and Konan, all 18; Kamal, Kondo and Kwadwo, all 17; Kandwani, 16, Kwame and Kabelo, both 15; Kofi, Kazemba and Kwayera, all 14; Kwada, Kefentse, Kijana and Kekeletso, all 13; Kayode and Kopano, both 11; Kantar, Kalonji and Khalfani, all 9; and Kitwani, 7. The girls are Kianga, 13; Kanika and Kaluuwa, both 11; Kadso, 10; Kagiso, 9, and Kimaada, 8. Missing from the group is **Kojo, Jr.** who was senselessly murdered by another teenager in 1982 over the own-



**Kojo Odo** (above, c.), a 44-year-old bachelor, has adopted 31 children (below), all of whom are either physically or emotionally handicapped or both. The family recently moved from New York City to Columbus, Ohio, after **Odo** accepted a job there.





In the **Odo** household (above), some of the walls are decorated with African art, and all of the children have African-inspired names that begin with the letter "K." The children, who range in age from seven to 24 years, must complete their daily chores (at right and below) before they are allowed to go outside and play (below, right). **Odo**, an acknowledged expert in the child-care field, admits that his task isn't easy, but it is one that he thoroughly enjoys from day to day.



## A BACHELOR *Continued*

ership of a watch.

Why all the "Ks"? **Kojo** explains: "It all began with **Kojo**, Jr. When I got him he wanted my first name. I named the second child, Kwame, after [late Ghanaian President] Kwame Nkrumah, and then another, Konan, after a friend from the Ivory Coast. After that it became a kind of family tradition."

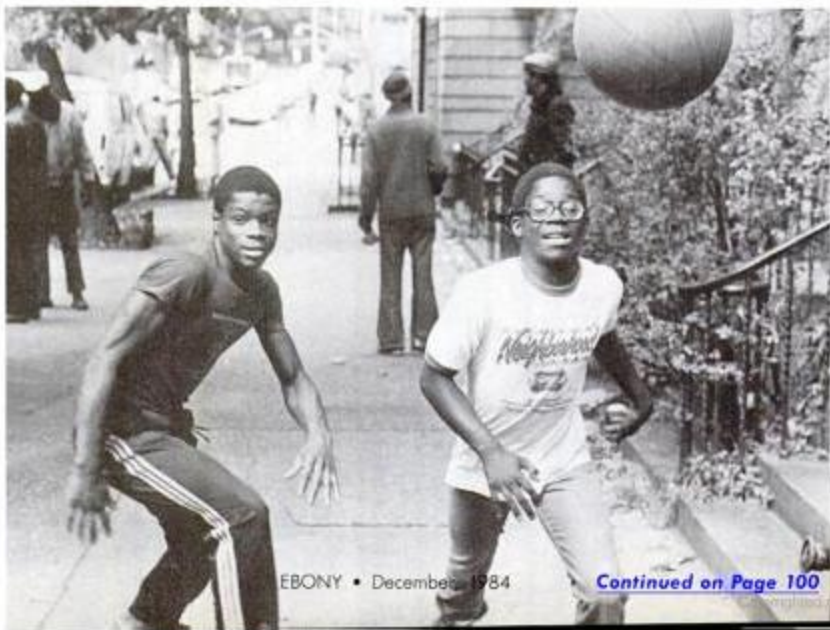
Why all the adoptions? **Kojo's** reply is direct and uncomplicated: "First a love of children and a love of parenting. Second, the adoptions are a political statement stemming from my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. I remember as a member of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) the constant stress on being willing to accept responsibility." Also, he continued, "Taking in children was a part of my family tradition and part of our African heritage. We just didn't do it formally. Once I got involved in adoption and saw the great need, the momentum just never stopped. All of my children were considered 'hard-to-place' by the system because of their physical and emotional needs, but I consider them as children who just need a family."

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**I**N the Odo household, chores are shared. The older children are expected to help the younger ones and to contribute to the best of his or her ability. They are placed in four groupings — the little boys, the girls, the adolescent boys and the older teenagers. "Because of the numbers," says **Kojo**, "I strive to avoid the kind of over-organization and rigidity that would make our home seem more like an institution than a real home." An



## A BACHELOR Continued

institution it is not. The **Odo** children argue, yell, embrace, laugh, cry, get punished, receive praise and jive with each other like a family, not like youngsters in an institution.

There are critics who strongly oppose the idea of **Kojo** adopting so many children. They insist that no single man, no matter how noble his intentions, can properly take care of 31 children, especially children with special needs. Other, more cynical critics, insist that **Kojo** must be doing it for the money." **Kojo** responds: "Firstly, I'm not doing it alone. I have support from people like Jean Thrash, who, for the past five years, has come by four times weekly to tutor the kids and sometimes take them out. Others, including my family, have also been very supportive.



In the basement (above), Kwaku, 20, prepares to put a new coat of paint on one of the doors. At left, Kwadwo, 17 (l.), and Kamal, 18, go head-to-head in a game of *Belly Up*. **Odo**, a strong believer in the strength of the Black family, has adopted children from California, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and New York. In 1983, the national Fathers' Day Committee presented him with one of their 10 Father of the Year awards.

The children themselves help out, with the older ones helping the younger ones. It's not easy, but together we manage to deal with most of one another's needs. As for those who talk about money, all I can say is that the subsidies provided by the system are designed to meet only basic needs, and they barely do that. The only way you can have enough money to take care of 31 children is to inherit lots of it."

**Kojo**, who, as an acknowledged expert in the child care field, has lectured at several major universities, including Columbia, and who has spoken to, worked for or acted as consultant to a host of child care agencies across the country, has some harsh criticisms of his own for the child care system. "I must say that, at least theoretically, the system seeks to address emergency needs of families by taking children into care," he says.

As can be expected, **Kojo**, who de-

scribes himself as "an African American male committed to the struggle of my people, here and abroad" is a serious advocate of adoption. His position is best expressed in a letter he wrote to people who had seen the film, *Children of Pride*, that featured his family. "... It is our greatest hope," he wrote, "that through seeing our family, you will give one or more of the thousands of children like mine a chance at the love, commitment and stability that a family can give. *These children are often not easy to get, and, in many cases, hard to keep, but they also bring rewards and accomplishments without measure:* a word from a child who came without speech... a step from a child who could not walk... a hug and a kiss from the child afraid to love and trust. Good luck in giving a child a permanent home or encouraging someone else to make that total commitment...."