



A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...

We are in the last day of PRIDE month where we experienced open expressions of support, acceptance and strength for and with the LGBTQ+ community. We all know that hasn't always been the case. Cultural humility is one construct for understanding and developing a process-oriented approach to competency. Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington and Utsey (2013) conceptualize cultural humility as the “ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]” (p. 2).

Three factors guide a sojourner toward cultural humility. The first aspect is a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Underlying this piece is the knowledge that we are never finished — we never arrive at a point where we are done learning. Therefore, we must be humble and flexible, bold enough to look at ourselves critically and desire to learn more. When we do not know something, are we able to say that we do not know? Willingness to act on the acknowledgement that we have not and will not arrive at a finish line is integral to this aspect of cultural humility as well. Understanding is only as powerful as the action that follows.

The second feature of cultural humility is a desire to fix power imbalances where none ought to exist (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Recognizing that each person brings something different to the proverbial table of life helps us see the value of each person. When practitioners interview clients, the client is the expert on his or her own life, symptoms and strength... Finally, cultural humility includes aspiring to develop partnerships with people and groups who advocate for others (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Though individuals can create positive change, communities and groups can also have a profound impact on systems. We cannot individually commit to self-evaluation and fixing power imbalances without advocating within the larger organizations in which we participate. Cultural humility, by definition, is larger than our individual selves — we must advocate for it systemically. <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2013/08/cultural-humility>



In this special edition of "Spotlight on What's Rights" we are highlighting extraordinary individuals who were willing to tell us their story so that we as a system can evolve in our relationships with others in our workforce and in understanding of the children, youth and families we serve.

We are so thankful to Kris Robles for allowing us to understand his personal journey. To Robin McHalen for her decades of advocacy resulting in Connecticut truly becoming a leader nationally for the supports and programs we offer those in the LGBTQ+ community. On the 5-year anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling which guaranteed the rights of gay and lesbian individuals to marry, we spoke to Brian and Wil. They gave voice to their uncertainty, as a gay couple, if they would be approved to adopt. Taking a risk after receiving well-timed encouragement, they entered into the licensing process. The children soon followed.

Imagine the lives of little Harper and Harlow without them???

Imagine Brian and Wil's lives without Harper and Harlow???

Join me in acknowledging PRIDE month, those who are living their true authentic self and celebrating the positive impact our system can have on others when we evolve-- listen and alter our actions towards one another.

Brian and Wil

Brian and Wil, who were married in a same sex union, always dreamed of being parents. Together, they hoped to raise children in a healthy, same sex home, focusing on love and family values. Brian and Wil both grew up in big families and wanted to start their own family, modeling for their children what love should be. Sexual preference bore no influence on their hopes and desires to be a parent. They knew that their supportive connection from extended family along with their strong morals and values, would create a loving environment for any child.



Once Brian and Wil decided it was time to become parents, they explored many different resources from adoption agencies, invitro/surrogate procedures and adoption options overseas. The cost for any of these options were extremely expensive and some had no guarantees of adoption. It was frustrating for them to say the least. They were telling one of their good friends, who at one point worked for DCF, about their journey exploring options along with their overwhelming feelings of defeat. She asked why they hadn't considered DCF. Brian candidly explained "we never considered DCF and did not see much information about the agency during our research online. We were very hesitant to explore this option, thinking that DCF is not going to let a gay couple, raise a child, but decided to see if we were going to be rejected. We had our own perception of being rejected or denied because of our sexual orientation but, we were wrong!"

Brian said that he and Wil have been blessed from the very minute they walked into the Bridgeport DCF area office. With the amazing, compassionate social work staff, who, rather than judge – guided, making the process informative and supportive with no judgment or biases.

When asked if there were any barriers that they experienced as a gay couple, Brian explained "the only barriers were the ones that we created". Explaining that their fear of fostering and then potentially having to give the child back, was difficult to overcome. Understanding the Department's vision and mission, they were fully aware that reunification to the birth family was a priority. Brian acknowledge the risks of the heart but knew that he and Wil were providing a stable and loving home for the children, for as long as they needed them. For these Dads, beautiful Harper Rose and Harlow James would need them, forever.

Harper was born on August 9th, 2016 and was adopted two years later. Brian and Will were placed with Harper right after she was born and, Harlow, who was born on February 2nd, 2019, was adopted a year and a half later. He was placed with Brian and Wil at six months of age.



Brain said that "Wil and I agreed we wanted to raise our children with the most transparency we could about adoption." The couple has open adoption agreements with both of the children's families. Harper talks to her mom often on a cell phone that we set up in our home for the kid's parents to contact us and we can contact them. Harlow's grandmother stays connected through email, with correspondences and shared pictures. Harlow's parents did not want contact.

Brian is a strong and vocal advocate for DCF adoptions. He believes that the LGBTQ community is unaware of not only the agencies needs but they are also unaware of the departments willingness to consider all couples, regardless of their sexual orientation, for foster care and adoption. "Love is love", and there are many children in need. Knowledge can make all the difference in the world.

When asked what he would say to a same sex couple, contemplating making that call to the KID HERO line. Without hesitation, Brian said - "Do it! Make the call! It will most likely be the most rewarding thing you can do to become a parent and never fear rejection. You will be surprised when you sit down and talk with a social worker at DCF and think, why did I not do this sooner"

Brian strongly encourages our department to share real-life special interest stories to engage the community and to dispel those myths and misconceptions that are still so prevalent. "There should be no stereotype to being a good parent. Gay, straight, single! The more we share and educate, we will lessen the fear and more people will be exploring this option".

Brian Moutinho and Wil Vitali are Dad's to Harper, age 3 and Harlow, age 2. They are currently pursuing an out of state placement of Harper's birth sibling. Brian has also been a huge supporter of CAFAF's, Avenue of Dreams, connecting his former upper management position at, Franseca's Woman's Boutiques, with this project.



WHO I AM

"Pride" has different meanings for different people, of course. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) Pride Month is currently celebrated each year in June to honor the 1969 Stonewall Uprising in Manhattan. As a Puerto Rican transgender parent, social worker and person in recovery, this month provides an opportunity to reflect not only on my life, but also the many others who came before me.

At 17 years young, I was trying to find my place in the world and living on my own. I was an adolescent battling a system that didn't understand who I was or what I was feeling. Just like so many of our youth today in the LGBT community, I struggled to find my place in the world. I had many adults cross my path and help guide me in making better decisions in my life. It was at the age of 21 years old when I met my first transgender man who was telling his story. He was a man in recovery and a person who spoke about never feeling right in his body. When I saw that he was living his true authentic self, I recognized what I needed to do to live my true self.

However, as we all know, things are not that easy. Living in a world that did not recognize individuals as equals and not having access to pay for services made things feel impossible. Insurance did not recognize this as a medical necessity in 1998. So, I was stuck with conforming to what society thought was acceptable so that I could work and survive.

I continued to suffer. Looking at myself daily reminded me who I wasn't. These were very hard times for me. It wasn't until I was in graduate school at University of Connecticut School of Social Work that I began to have equal access to things. Nevertheless, insurance continued to be a barrier as it only covered limited things for transgender people such as myself.

During an internship with True Colors ([see accompanying story](#)) as I was taking classes in policy surrounding the LGBTQ community, I began to find my voice again. Feeling blessed to work alongside Robin McHaelen, the executive director and founder of True Colors, I became empowered to take the plunge and come out to the world. I was supported by my peers and nominated to speak on behalf of my UCONN graduating class in 2006.

Surprisingly, I again faced being oppressed by the dean of students in the social work program who told me not to identify in the gender that I saw for myself and to modify my speech to use non-affirming language about myself. I yet again had to conform to what society felt was safer and more comfortable for them. At the age of 29, I again experience judgment and discrimination from people in my chosen field by being told that I couldn't live in the gender with which I identified. Thankfully, my experience at True Colors helped me develop the courage and knowledge that I needed to educate and advocate for people like myself. I felt a responsibility to help those who didn't understand and help them learn that we all deserve a voice and to be seen and affirmed for who we are.

During my transition, I continued to learn that my story wasn't just about me. My older sister had her story regarding my transition. I learned that she had to come out as well. She still lived in my hometown and was constantly asked about me. She slowly had to find ways to tell people. She struggled with being judged and feared that family and friends would not accept who I am. With the help of her own therapist, friends and open communication between her and I, she too learned to have a voice and share her own story.

Together, we presented at the True Colors conference -- sharing our perspective of the family's transition (Brother Sister LOVE). Parents have their process and sometimes this takes a little time. I didn't really give my parents an option. It was either they could love me for who I am, or they were not going to play a role in my life. I was at a point in my life that I was done living for others, and I was ready to finally live my true authentic self for nobody but me.

Today my wife and I struggle with sharing our story out of fear that we will be shunned, treated differently, and discriminated against in our community. We have even more fear now that we have two boys. We are cautious about with whom we share our story. I want to be treated equally and not judged that I am somehow not the same as any other man. My boys have been brought up to know about gender and that love is love regardless of sex, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, or socioeconomic class. Fear is very real for us, and it is something that we face daily. We talk with our boys about who I am and educate them to embrace who they are and who we are. We bring up our kids to not judge because we know that we have been judged and, at times, we are still judged.

It is important, as I work for DCF, to continue to educate workers and be the voice our youth and families need when they don't have a voice themselves. Many of our youth and families are afraid. They are not sure who to turn too. It is important for staff to put aside their own misconceptions and learn. If you don't know, just ask. I would rather be asked a question than be talked about on the floor. I know what this feels like in an office and it never feels good.

If you have youth on your case load wanting to be called different pronouns, the best thing you can do is to build rapport with that youth and to affirm them. Don't be afraid to ask them what name they want to be called. Face your own fears because they are more scared than you are.

BE PROUD, HAVE PRIDE, STAND UP, & SPEAK UP! WE ALL WANT TO BE SEEN, UNDERSTOOD AND HEARD. HAPPY PRIDE MONTH 2020!

Thank you for hearing my voice and seeing me as my true authentic self.

Kris Robles LCSW, Region 5 , Supervising clinician

The Stonewall Uprising - Inspiring Change

In the 1960s, hostility towards those who did not conform to broadly-accepted norms was rampant. This was evident in the treatment to those who lived openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) person.

Perhaps surprising today, these sentiments were especially harsh in New York City. Laws provided you could be arrested for wearing less than three articles of clothing that -- according to convention - matched your sex. It was illegal to serve alcoholic beverages to homosexuals. Married men and women needed to live their homosexual lives in secret. Blackmail was not uncommon.

Fueled by this social context, on June 28, NYC police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay club located in Greenwich Village in Manhattan. After police, acting without respect for human dignity, roughly forced employees and patrons out of the bar, the community took action. What followed was the Stonewall Uprising - protests in the community that served to both draw attention to these injustices and launched the gay rights movement.



Two leading participants in the Stonewall Uprising were Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, both transgender women of color. A memorial to this brave pair is being built in Greenwich Village, the first monument to transgender activists in the world. This memorial is part of a national park dedicated to the memory of the Stonewall Uprising.

The first Pride march took place in New York City on June 28, 1970 on the one-year anniversary of that horrible scene in Greenwich Village.

Now over 50 years later, protests occur across the country, and the world, on this date to celebrate Gay Pride and the rights and respect all people should experience.

Connecticut's Unique Alliance With LGBTQ+ Support Organization, True Colors, Inc.

Since 1999, the year True Colors incorporated as a nonprofit, the advocacy, education and support organization for LGBTQ+ youth has been a vitally important partner for the Department of Children and Families.

The Department's involvement with LGBTQ+ issues, however, goes back even before True Colors was established by its executive director, Robin McHaelen. In 1994, the Department was one of the first co-sponsors of an annual conference to support LGBTQ+ youth that continued each year right through 2019.



Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic stopped the streak of in-person conferences this year. But True Colors - despite the lack of any notice -- quickly pivoted and is now offering a six-week series of "mini-cons" every Friday from 2 to 4 pm ending June 26. YouTube videos and a Facebook Live event are made available that can be accessed -- along with many other educational and support resources -- at [True Colors Premier Channel](#).

Ms. McHaelen (see sidebar) said the conference grew out of her field work project when she was obtaining her master's degree in social work from the University of Connecticut. A needs analysis showed that only two local organizations in Connecticut existed to support LGBTQ+ youth and that a statewide approach was sorely needed. While the conference was initially conceived as a one-time event, it grew into True Colors, an organization that continues to robustly serve LGBTQ+ youth still today.

"True Colors exists to support a world where LGBTQ+ youth thrive," Ms. McHaelen said. "True Colors works to ensure LGBTQ+ youth — of all backgrounds — are safe, valued, and able to be their authentic selves. We do this by providing education, advocacy, and support to LGBTQ+ youth, their families, communities, and those who work with them."

Indeed, the need to serve this population is great. According to a 2019 study in the *Journal Pediatrics* conducted by university researchers, about 30 percent of children in foster care identified as LGBTQ+ as did 25 percent of youth with unstable housing. The research, which was based on surveys of California middle and high school students, also found that LGBTQ+ youth report more fights in school, victimization and mental health problems compared to heterosexual youth in foster care.

Ms. McHaelen said True Colors works with schools, families, communities of faith, local, state and federal agencies and officials, and policy makers. Staffed with only four full-time and one part-time employees, it has a volunteer board of directors, numerous student interns, and scores of volunteers. Its budget of just under \$700,000 includes funding from the Department as well as private and corporate donors.



Ms. McHaelen said the partnership between True Colors and the Department is unique. She said Connecticut is "above the curve in having a child welfare agency acknowledging the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth." She said that Connecticut and Massachusetts were early to the job of focusing on this population and stood out from the rest of the nation. "There is still work to do," she said. "But there is a real commitment from Connecticut's leadership."

Below is a description of each of True Color's six programs as provided by Ms. McHaelen:

One-on-One Mentoring Program

Across the nation, there are only two LGBTQ+ mentoring programs, and True Colors offers one of them. More than 60 Connecticut youth benefit from one-on-one mentoring with trained and screened adults through weekly group activities such as game nights, movie nights, dances, and more. These activities provide the opportunity for healthy peer interactions and social development, which are key components of adolescent development that are often missing for LGBTQ+ youth. During the COVID pandemic, this service has been provided remotely, Ms. McHaelen said. This program is funded through the Department as well as private foundations such as the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

Annual Conference

True Color's oldest and best-known program, the annual conference is now the largest and most comprehensive LGBTQ+ youth issues conference in the nation. More than 3,500 youth, educators, social workers, clinicians, family members and clergy participate in more than 250 workshops, films, activities and events over the course of the 2 or 3-day event. School groups participate from more than half of the communities in CT, as well from across the Northeast and the entire nation. This program is funded through conference registrations, co-sponsorships, ads and donations.

Youth Leadership Development

When True Colors began work with schools and school environments in 1994, there were only four gay/straight alliances in Connecticut. Now there are more than 160. True Colors had a hand directly or indirectly in the development of most of them. Over the last 22 years, True Colors has conducted dozens of summits, forums and trainings for youth, which has helped launch and maintain programs in their school. In addition, the organization created various leadership development curricula for its organizers and volunteers. Most recently, True Colors has created a six-week, on-site training program to give young activists the tools they need to advocate for themselves and others. This program is funded through private foundations and individual donors.

Safe Harbors Task Force/Foster Parent Recruitment

Supported through an agreement with the Department, Safe Harbors includes policy, programming and advocacy work. True Colors manages a statewide task force focused on the needs of LGBT youth in out-of-home care, including foster care, congregate care, and youth in the juvenile justice system. In addition, Safe Harbors recruits foster parents for teens of all orientations and genders and have helped find homes for more than 20 youth over the last few years. This program is funded by the Department.