

November 2021

Department of Children and Families  
**SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT**



## A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...



*The safest place a child can be is in the arms of a loving family.*

These words came to life as we celebrated November as **National Adoption Month! During Connecticut's Adoption Day**, we brought the total number of adoptions this year to over 400!

Adoption is merely one form of permanency. During this prolonged pandemic response, we have safely reunified over 900 children — 475 of those in the 2021 calendar year.

Approximately 400 additional children had their guardianship transferred to kin. Thousands of children have been able to safely remain in their own families.



Adoption Day was an emotionally charged testament to all of the moving parts necessary that pour into the stability and wellbeing of children. Our sincere gratitude to our partners in the Judicial Branch, especially the Judges in the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters who opened their virtual courtrooms across the state so countless individuals logging in from CT and abroad to celebrate the finalization of children's legal permanency.

We also appreciate **Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz** who shared in attendance at an adoption celebration hosted by Office Director Dr Dakibu Muley and the hard-working staff of DCF's New Haven Area Office.

We can't thank the members of the media enough...the press coverage was in full force to capture all the fabulousness of CT's Adoption Day! Many many thanks!!!



***What was Adoption Day like for these children and families?*** Read the embedded stories and videos...

Jovani kept busy by [chasing a balloon](#) as his mom and grandparents were nervously attentive to the Judge's words solidifying their bond to each other.

Padma had her entire class join in to watch her virtual adoption hearing.

Statewide media followed Alivia and her [journey to adoption](#) by her grandmother.



There was [Zander](#), adopted at 16 years of age, reinforcing that children of all ages need permanency.

Antario was adopted at 12 years of age by the same family who adopted his older brother, 15 years earlier. [Read more about the family.](#)

Luke proudly took a picture at the end of his hearing. Adopted by a special family who maintains contact with his birth parents, invites them to school events, holiday dinners and other important events in his life.



Special thanks also to the Assistant Attorneys General and the children's attorneys for their committed advocacy throughout the entire court processes that was culminated on this symbolic day.

The appreciation continued for the efforts of other stakeholder partners including school personnel, therapists and community-based providers who all work to form the "village" surrounding our children and families. The Adoption Assistance Program (AAP) is one support for families post adoption and guardianship. Please [watch the video](#) produced by the AAP for more information.

The tireless efforts of the DCF staff who worked with each of these families was quite evident. Our work is not easy... yet the care, compassion and steadiness of all of the DCF personnel who make it all come together day in and day out are to be commended.

Collectively, we have to double-down on eliminating the barriers to *timely* permanency for children— CT Adoption Day 2021 energized the commitment to be purposeful in those efforts.

To sum it all up— 10 courts finalized 52 adoptions to anchor a lifetime of infinite memories to be created by these 'forever families!'

As we celebrate with our own families during the holidays this year, everything described here allowed these children - and thousands of others - to be celebrating as well.

Adoption Day and everyday where permanency is achieved for children, is a wonderfully successful day!

*Commissioner Dorantes*

## "I would like this woman right here to be my mom..."



Alivia Martin walked into a room full of news cameras, flowers and candy. There were unicorns and balloons. This was her moment.

Over four years ago, Alivia's mother and older sister were victims of a homicide. Since that day, she has been in the arms of her grandmother, Corinna Martin, her biggest support and advocate.

Adoption day was Alivia's day. A time to celebrate the strength and love between a grandmother and her granddaughter. With matching outfits, Alivia and Ms. Martin hugged and laughed, held each other's hands and anxiously awaited the adoption proceedings to begin.

It was an incredible journey that brought this family to finally get to sit in the New Have Office "adoption room."

"It's been extremely hard. Alivia and I have talked about how I'm not replacing my daughter. I'm not trying to become a new mom for her. I am just continuing on the parenting and having this honor and humbly accepting this privilege to be able to be a parent and be recognized legally as her parent," stated Ms. Martin.



Describing the resilience of Ms. Martin is almost impossible. She has actually lost two daughters - both to domestic violence homicides. She has turned these tragedies into developing her own non-profit entitled, "Mothers of Victim's Equality Inc..." with the goal to ensure that victims not only have equal rights but also a voice.

Ms. Martin has given Alivia her voice. At seven years old, she shows poise and insight far greater than her chronological age. Alivia is resilient, in large part because her biggest advocate sits right by her side.



"She is the one directing me," Ms. Martin joked.

"She's the piece. She's the last piece in the puzzle," Alivia stated while referring to her grandmother.

Alivia moved effortlessly around the room. At one point, she took the microphone from a reporter and greeted the room full of adults. "Thank you for coming everyone," she stated. That room included Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz, Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes and

Alivia's trusted Social Worker Tomi Handy.

Ms. Handy has worked with the family for almost four years. "She's the epitome of strength and resilience, patience and love," Ms. Handy stated as she referred to Ms. Martin.

Ms. Handy refers to Alivia as "Liv" which to her means "life." How did this relationship develop? How did Ms. Handy assist in bringing Alivia through the traumas she experienced? "Do the simple things that join you and the family," Ms. Handy stated as she easily recounted the long drives she and Alivia took, days running around at the park, going out to eat and of course, singing Beyoncé songs!



Ms. Handy made Alivia a stained-glass picture of a unicorn. "I want her to remember the good times we had," she stated.

"Ms. Martin you have made Alivia a better person. Alivia you have made your grandma a better caretaker, but you both have made me a better social worker," Ms. Handy stated.



When asked if she wanted to speak prior to the adoption being finalized, Ms. Martin acknowledged the media. "It is truly mindboggling and overwhelming sense of joy and appreciation to know that you guys really really wanted to do this and share this with us."

She then thanked all of those who supported her and Alivia. "Without you, without this village, this moment right here could have been completely different, and I just thank Jehovah God for this opportunity to be able to share it with all of you," she stated.



Ms. Martin appeared countless times in court to advocate for Alivia. She had one special message for the Superior Court Judge. "I thank you for always, every time that I have appeared before you, that you have treated me with the utmost respect within the confines of your duty as a Judge," Ms. Martin humbly stated.

"It is times like this where it makes all of those tragedies just a little bit more bearable," she added.

It was then time for Alivia to speak and once again, the uniqueness of this special little girl was apparent to all.

"I would like this woman right here to be my mom because she is the most prettiest .... She's the smartest and kindest and the woman that I know could be the right mom for me.... it's her."

The adoption was finalized, or as Ms. Martin stated, "We legal now."

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## "That's my son"

Kally Moquet, a Middletown resident, first became involved with the Department when she was five years old and spent many years in foster care. She described that time in her life as uncertain, not feeling comfortable or free to be herself.

She is now an adoptive parent to an adolescent boy - making a difference in a child's life, just like someone make a difference in hers.



Growing up, Kally masked her feelings behind her beautiful smile and bright personality until an adult colleague where she worked at BJ's Wholesale Store, took what she explained as a "deep dive." This co-worker noticed that Kally, who had just turned 16 years old, seemed to be hurting inside and the two got to know one another. Soon after, this woman became a kinship foster parent for Kally. "She is still in my life to this very day," explained Kally. "She will always be, family."



Kally attributes her childhood in foster care to a deeply rooted desire to make a difference for other kids, to own her own home and fill those bedrooms with foster children.

Kally attended college and had internships in the Middletown Office and Central Office, learning soon that she wanted to begin her career with the Department. She became a Social Worker in the New Britain DCF Office and

received her Master of Social Work degree while working full time. Kally worked for the Department for four years before leaving to follow other career goals. Working with kids, especially teens, has been her passion. Kally is currently a school social worker, pursuing a law degree at Springfield College. "I hope to impact change at all levels of the social welfare system," she explained.

Kally became a foster parent to Zander when he was 14 years old. She remembers with fondness the day he walked into her home, their first grocery store shopping trip and those early days figuring one another out. "Since he walked through that door, he was my son. I was committed to giving him the support he needed and all the things that took me so long to have," she explained.

When asked to talk about Zander, Kally immediately lit up with so much pride and joy. She explained him to be kind, compassionate, empathetic, smart, quirky and a survivor. Zander survived childhood cancer at the young age of 2 years old when he was diagnosed with a Wilms tumor. She believes his illness made him that much more of a fighter, his story gave him strength.

Kally can't imagine not having Zander in her life.

Kally encourages others to foster a teen, reassuring anyone who is thinking of making that call to do so, promising them that there is support and a need and, there is no such thing as a perfect parent.

Kally remembers asking Zander if he wanted her to adopt him. His response was "ummm, yah," as if it was assumed. "I'm not going anywhere," Zander said.



"The bond between the two strengthened," explained Alison Sroka, Zander's DCF Social Worker. "Gone was the foster parent/foster child role the family started as and in came the mother/son role. Truly amazing to see that bond grown and strengthen."

Kally never imaged that she would adopt the child of her first foster care placement, but it was meant to be. She felt that he needed her and because of her own experiences as a teen in care, she knew his struggle. "I knew what he needed from me and I met him where he was at," she said.

Their mutual love and respect are evident as is Zander's appreciation for Kally. "Zander has come out of his shell and has demonstrated that he loves and cares for Kally. Kally's love and support encouraged him to show his emotions and form healthy relationships. He will finally have the safety and stability he has been looking for his entire life," according to Ms. Sroka.

Zander said that Kally keeps him on track, exposes him to so many opportunities and new experiences and is unconditionally supportive.

Zander was adopted on Friday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, one of the 52 children adopted in CT on National Adoption Day. The hearing was attended by many including one very special person - Giovanna Francisco - Kally's foster mother who cared for her as an adolescent.

Once the judge finalized the adoption, Kally turned to Zander and said "Well, hello Mr. Moquet."

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# Adoptive Families Get Needed Support From DCF-UConn Health Partnership



For Sara and Brian Kleinman, a married couple who adopted three boys from foster care, having access to professionals who know adoption inside and out is a huge help.

"Having an organization that specializes in adoption and the joys and challenges that come with it is really critical," said Ms. Kleinman, who lives in East Granby and was first licensed to provide foster care in 2004.

That is why the Department of Children and Families (DCF) partnered with UConn Health to establish the Adoption Assistance Program (AAP) during the mid-2000s, said Allyson Powell, the AAP program director who herself adopted two children.

"Families continue to have needs throughout the life span of the kids they adopt," said Ms. Powell. "The AAP gives adoptive families a place to go for support in a confidential environment where they know they will not be judged."

The AAP provides post-adoption support -- including assessment, education, brief counselling, and referral services -- to adoptive families and to families formed through guardianship. Housed on the campus of UConn Health, the program is staffed by four licensed clinical social workers and by contracted case managers provided through *the Village for Children and Families* and the *Family and Children's Agency*.



The program receives approximately 600 calls annually, most from adoptive parents and legal guardians. Approximately one half of the calls received are requests for therapy referrals or for guidance accessing other services. The program also receives requests from other professionals for consultation support. The other half of the calls received result in a need for longer term support for a family. In these, a formal case is opened and the family is followed by AAP staff until the concern is resolved or when other services can be identified and are in place.

Ms. Kleinman said one of the biggest ways AAP helped her family was to educate her and her husband on how challenging it can be for a child to be in foster care - even in cases where the child is adopted.

"We did not have a full understanding of trauma and the attachment issues that result and how that affects the way the boys interact with others and attach to us as parents," she said. "The AAP gave us opportunities to learn to understand the foundation of some complicated behaviors that emerged. It is really critical for adoptive parents to have a hub to go to where that's what they know."



Ms. Kleinman affirmed the importance of making adoptive parents feel comfortable reaching out for help. "It always felt very supportive at the AAP," she said. "I never felt judged. They were warm, welcoming, accepting and knowledgeable. It felt like a safe place to go."

Ms. Kleinman said it has been a joy to adopt the trio - Grant, who is 15, Luke, age 13, and Caleb, age 11 -- but that having access to experts is comforting and invaluable. She said AAP has helped the family find clinical specialists paid for by the state, sent the boys to summer camp and guided the family to competent providers while offering some financial assistance for things not covered by their insurance.

"Each of my boys experience their birth story in different ways, and things pop up at different times for them individually. We are still figuring it all out with the help of organizations like AAP. They are a group of professionals who understand the complexities of adoption and are available to guide and support us in our parenting journey," Ms. Kleinman said.

Ms. Powell said many families reach out for help because the children they adopted are struggling with their own histories.

"Adoptive parents can be uncomfortable with what to share" about a child's biological family and the story about the child's entry into foster care and ultimate adoption, Ms. Powell said. "A child may want to know more about their (biological) family, but parents can be uncomfortable and not confident how to talk to a six-year-old about it."



Ms. Powell said AAP advises honesty but also to talk in a manner that is right for the child's age and development. "We advocate to be really honest but in a developmentally appropriate way."

Ms. Powell said the program shows good results. Surveys of the families shows that 85 percent feel better equipped to meet their child's needs and that 94 percent are satisfied with the support they got from the AAP and would use the agency again in the future.

"People come back because they find us helpful and empathetic," Ms. Powell said.

The program recently released this [Adoption Assistance Program Video](#).

*Editor's Note: Adoptive families can contact the AAP by calling 877-679-1961 toll free in CT or anywhere at 860-679-4006. Families can also email the AAP at [aap@uchc.edu](mailto:aap@uchc.edu).*