

"I made it"



Vanessa Hernandez has a message for those around her. "If you look at me, you will never know what I have been through."

Gone are the days when her text messages were monitored, paychecks were taken, and she was not free to speak openly as she lived in daily fear of her coercive and abusive partner.

"He drilled it in my head that there was nobody else but him," Vanessa stated. "I knew he would harm me. I had no support around me and nowhere to go."

The story of Vanessa's survival, and impeccable strength, began when DCF was called to her home while she was caring for Elijah, her oldest child.

The conditions in the home were found to be unsafe, and placement into a domestic violence shelter was the best option. "It was traumatic to share everything with everybody," she remembers.

At the time, Vanessa was also pregnant with Camden and shortly after he was born, the decision was made that placement into foster care was the best option to keep him safe while Elijah was placed with relatives.

Over the next couple of years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, what Vanessa endured for the love of her children is nothing short of remarkable.

While separated, Vanessa consistently visited and yearned for the day reunification would occur. Yet, the control she was under almost forced her into accepting her children would never come home.

"I was with a guy who thought he was right all the time. He was abusive," she stated.

While she worked at Dunkin' Donuts and Waterbury Hospital, she was not allowed to accept rides from other people. The couple had no car, forcing Vanessa to walk approximately 2.5 miles to and from work each day regardless of the weather or temperature.

Her partner controlled the money, took her paychecks, and convinced Vanessa the rent was paid. The couple was evicted, forcing them to live in abandoned buildings for almost a year. They struggled to eat. "I would wash myself in a sink in the bathroom across from a motel," Vanessa stated. Despite these enormous challenges, she never missed a day of work.

She left Connecticut to live with relatives out of state.

He found her and she came back to Waterbury.

"I felt hopeless," Vanessa recalls.

Visits continued with the boys. At each one, her partner was present to keep a close watch on her, monitoring every move and not allowing her to express herself when Agency personnel were present.

It was determined to be in Elijah's best interests to remain in his current placement with relatives and his guardianship was transferred accordingly. Camden remained in care.



After years of referrals for service, court orders and assessments, the Agency was put in the unenviable position to now seek permanency for Camden - not believing either parent would be able or willing to provide them a safe and stable home. A Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) petition was filed and the court process - to sever parental rights forever - had begun.

"I was coming to the conclusion he would never come home," Vanessa recalls thinking.

One courageous decision changed the trajectory of Vanessa's life and that of Camden.

"I got tired," Vanessa stated, reflecting on the day she visited with Camden alone, against her partner's demands, and finally left him. "I knew he was not going to change."

"I am still seeing the same you and same attitude," she told him.

Vanessa moved in with a friend of hers until she could afford an apartment of her own.

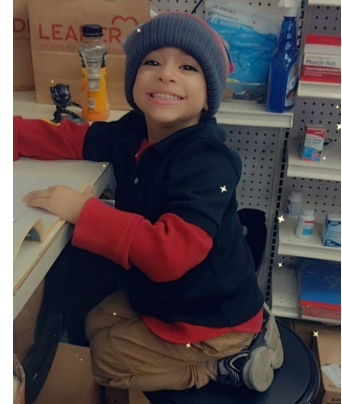
What followed were more acts of violence on his part, arrest warrants, protective orders, and Vanessa, along with multiple community agencies, working together to maintain her safety.

Most importantly, to work towards Camden coming home.

Around this time, Vanessa was assigned to Social Worker Kellie Hougasian of the Waterbury Office. "We had a connection," is how Vanessa describes their relationship. "Kellie was honest. I trusted her. She did not hide anything." Kellie answered all of Vanessa's questions and began to see a much different side of her.

"She helped me out so much. She saw my progress."

"It was an absolute pleasure working with Vanessa, as she showed resiliency and commitment to reunify with Camden. Vanessa always had a positive attitude and despite unforeseen obstacles at times, she never gave up," stated Kellie. "This positive outcome and amazing story are a true testament to Vanessa's hard work and love for her children. Needless to say, I was the one who was truly blessed to be her worker."



Vanessa was no longer under anyone's control. She made a strong connection with the DCF staff, engaged in supports and continued visiting Camden.

By agreement, the decision was made to send Camden home! "Is this really happening," Vanessa remembers saying to herself.

"I was super excited."

Camden is now home with a mother who loves him and overcame what appeared to be inescapable odds to be reunited with her little boy. "I am a big boy mommy," he was heard saying in the background during this interview.

Vanessa does intend to maintain the relationship with Camden's foster parent. "He knows her as mom," she stated in reference to the years Camden was raised by another family. "I know what it's like not to see your child."

Likewise, she aims to continue the relationship with relatives raising Elijah.

Camden is described as having a "whole lot of energy" and his days with his mom are now filled with going to the park and playing with friends.

Vanessa has a dream of becoming a counselor some day and helping other women facing similar adverse circumstances. "I know the fear they are going through. It took me a long time before I left," she stated. "You know you are strong enough to leave even though you do not think you are."

Vanessa also has a message for other parents involved with the Department. "Hard work pays off," she would tell them. "Accept the help. Everything will come out for the better."

"Stick through it. Stick it out. With hard work comes progress," she added.

"I made it."