



### Commissioner's Message

Happy Holidays to you and your families!



Whether it's the Celebration of Lights (Hanukkah), Celebration of Christ's birth (Christmas), or the annual celebration of African American life (Kwanzaa), or extended through to the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas El Día de los Reyes (Three Kings Day), other observances, or no formal celebration at all, 2020 is a year we will ALWAYS remember.

For me, this season is *the most wonderful time of the year!* Those words could not be more relevant for the stories that we are featuring in this month's *Spotlight on What's Right* newsletter.

2020 has brought the pandemic, economic insecurity, and racial unrest in our communities across the country. Yet, families are resilient; they are strong and when offered equitable supports, children have remained safely at home or found a permanent home during these otherwise uncertain times.

#### "Home for the Holidays"

*What do Heavyn, Willsy and Isaiah all have in common? They are **home for the holidays.***

One little girl never left her mother's side and while CT DCF provided in-home supports, the family remained in-tact.

Another little 11-year-old girl will be home with her family, almost 5,000 miles from Connecticut in Ghana, west Africa after being reunified with her mother.

Read also about Isaiah, who was adopted on *Adoption Day*. He benefits greatly from his permanent home while also maintaining contact with his birth mother - He is surrounded by so many adults who love and nurture him.



*What do Laura Thompson, Courtney White and Brittany Roberts have in common? They are the **CT DCF staff** who believe in the power of our families. They believed in a family's capacity to work through adversity. These staff members show us the outcomes of positive engagement, collaboration and teamwork.*

**Now..... I have a huge assignment for all of you in the next couple of weeks.**



Please take some time for yourself to reflect on your 2020 accomplishments....

The families you have helped

The children whose lives you have improved

Know you have touched so many lives and will impact so many more in the future-- because when the circumstances of the world got tough... **We got tougher to strengthen families.**

I cannot thank you enough for all you do each day for the children and families that we serve!

We will get through the Holidays and the end of 2020 **TOGETHER!**

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## "From Shame to Shine"



Aishia Ratliff was born in New Haven to a loving mother who did her best to provide and keep a roof over the family's head. Yet, this 39-year-old mother faced a lifetime of struggle.

At age five, she experienced significant trauma and child maltreatment. That was also the year her father abandoned her. At 12, she was smoking marijuana. Alcohol dulled her pain from the age of 14. In her early 20's, it was ecstasy. Then at age 25, crack cocaine and heroin became her solace.

Along the way, she gave birth when she was 19 to her son, Shy'lon, whom she handed over to her own mother to raise from age four until he turned 18. In 2009, she was sentenced to prison flowing from a robbery fueled by her need to fund her habits.

### Everything Has Been A Struggle

"Everything has been a struggle for me," Ms. Ratliff said.

After release in 2012, she stayed clean until 2014. She worked as a certified nurse assistant at Yale New Haven Hospital and elsewhere. Things then went bad again in 2014 when a family dispute led her to become homeless.

"I was living on the street with my pit bull," Ms. Ratliff remembered. She said she used New Haven city services to survive, including homeless shelters and the library for sanctuary.

"That's when I relapsed," she said. She would stay at "friends" but most of the time lived on the streets. "I carried a bag with three days of clothes in it," she said.

She caught a break in 2016 when the homeless shelter obtained a voucher for her to get an apartment. She turned to faith in God to stay clean for a year, and then she relapsed on crack. She attributes the long affair with substances to depression, anxiety and mental illness. Looking back on her decades of substance use, she said, "Drugs were my first love. It was something I could depend on and be in my comfort zone."

### Another Turn

In 2018, things took another turn. She was riding in a car driven by a man who was high on drugs, and an accident resulted. "It was a guy who I got high with," she said. She went to the hospital with a back injury, and she learned something that would change the rest of her life.

"I was shocked," she said. "They told me I was seven months pregnant."

That jolt led Ms. Ratliff to seek help getting off crack. On her own initiative, she found a program called Amethyst House, which provides treatment to women who live at the program with their children.

A month after moving to Amethyst House, she gave birth to Heavyn Royalty Sunchild Lopez in September 2018. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) responded to a report of suspected maltreatment at that point.



It wasn't a welcome introduction. "I didn't want you at all," she said of DCF's entering her life. "I was hoping the bad dream of you guys would go away."

### **Unwanted -- But A Chance At Renewal**

But it created a chance at renewal.

"Now I had to clean myself because I wasn't going to have a crack-addicted baby," she said. "I had to love someone more than my addiction."

She also needed someone in her corner.



Enter Courtney White, a DCF social worker with only two years on the job back then. The treatment social worker, assigned to a specialized "high-risk newborn" unit in the New Haven office, said her work with Ms. Ratliff has been based on honesty, respect and trust.

"I laid it all out for her," Ms. White recalled. "I explained how it was going to go, and I let her know that we are in this together. I said, 'I can't do the work for you, but I can do it with you.'"

She left Amethyst House in October 2018, and she returned to her New Haven apartment. Less than a year later, in June 2019, she relapsed on crack again.

### **Relapse Is Part Of The Recovery Process**

Ms. White said Ms. Ratliff relapsed on Father's Day weekend.

"With recovery from addiction, sometimes comes relapse," said Ms. White. "I told her that it doesn't mean Heavyn will be removed."

With the understanding that relapse is part of the recovery process, Ms. White helped Ms. Ratliff enter an in-home intensive substance use treatment program called Family Based Recovery (FBR) that sends a team to the home several times a week to provide both clinical and case management services.

Ms. Ratliff said, "It worked for a while and then I hit a glitch." She relapsed in August.

At that point, Ms. Ratliff said the Department gave her a choice. "I had the option to either give up my child or go to rehab with her," she said.

A meeting (known as a "considered removal" meeting) was held in August 2019 to see if a removal could be safely avoided. "She was presented the option of going to rehab with the baby or the Department would file" a petition to place Heavyn in foster care, said Ms. White.

That fork led Ms. Ratliff to see if they could find another residential treatment program that would allow Heavyn to remain with her. Ms. White and Ms. Ratliff began making phone calls. "We called every single program that would allow that," Ms. White said.

### **I Trust You Will Make the Right Decision**

But Ms. Ratliff was struggling with the decision. "She laid on the floor and cried and cried," said the social worker. "That was a turning point for her. She was on the phone with me throughout the night. I told her, 'you are a good mom and I trust you will make the right decision.'"

Indeed, she did.

She decided to take an opening at another residential substance use treatment program called Mother's Retreat in Groton. The morning Ms. Ratliff was scheduled to enter the program, Ms. White went to go get her and Heavyn and bring them to Groton.

Arriving at 7:30 a.m., it soon became evident that Ms. Ratliff was reluctant. Ms. White reassured the mother that she would bring her son to visit her and Heavyn in Groton. Ms. White also got permission from her supervisor to go with Ms. Ratliff to buy some necessities at a store across the street from the Groton facility. Ms. White stayed with Ms. Ratliff throughout the intake process. "I wanted her to feel that she was not alone," Ms. White remembered.

The program clicked for the mother. "She thrived in the program, and the staff raved about her," said Ms. White. "She was great with Heaven. She was a role model there. She did so well in that environment."

Ms. Ratliff completed the full 90-day program and was successfully discharged in December 2019. She returned to her apartment to live with Heavyn and Shy'lon. Mother's Retreat helped her enter an intensive outpatient program offered by the Connection, which she also successfully completed, said Ms. White.

Ms. Ratliff has stayed away from substances since then.

### **I Want It This Time**

"I want it this time," she said. "I was very motivated to keep Heavyn. I'm tired of chasing my drugs and being a captive of my addiction."



"I've been clean a year now and it feels good," she said. "I'm not considering it an accomplishment yet. I try to take one step up the ladder at a time. For me, it's not a day at a time. It's one second at a time."

Ms. White said Ms. Ratliff needed acceptance and support, and that the pair had built the trust necessary to take the path of keeping the family together despite the obvious risks.

"She was looking for that acceptance, reassurance and confidence that she could be a parent," Ms. White said. "She had the insight and the ability to reflect on her own challenges, struggles and goals. She admitted her mistakes and told me that she trusted that if I said the program is going to work, then I trust that."

### **A Mutual Trust**

"I had her buy in," Ms. White added. "She knew I shared her goals for Heavyn to have a safe and enriching childhood. She wanted that, and I wanted that, and it just became how are we going to make that happen. It was a mutual trust, but she had to do her part, and she was able to do that."

Ms. Ratliff lavishes praise on the social worker in return.

"Courtney is wonderful, and I could not have done it without her," said Ms. Ratliff. But that doesn't mean Ms. White sheltered her from reality. "Courtney didn't beat around the bush - if I was on two strikes, she let me know," said the mother. "She walked me all the way through and told me we can get through this."

The two developed a bond and a relationship.

"Me and Courtney would talk all day - she went beyond her job to make sure I would stay on the right track," said Ms. Ratliff.

Ms. White would visit Ms. Ratliff often at the program in Groton. "She was very supportive," Ms. Ratliff said. "She made sure I was comfortable, and she coached me. I cannot explain how understanding she was. She was very sympathetic."

Ms. White had a very clear insight into who mother was and what challenges stood in the way.

"She had extensive childhood trauma," said Ms. White. "I did what I could to meet her where she was at. But she put in all the work -- she's the one who did it."

Looking back, Ms. White expressed satisfaction with her work with this mom that resulted in an intact family. "She was a challenge, but a treat to work with," said Ms. White. "I could cry happy tears for her. It was very emotional and rewarding."

### **Heavyn Is Thriving**

Heavyn is thriving. Her mother describes her as "intelligent, classy and understanding. Everything about her is so cute - the way she wants to cuddle." Ms. Ratliff said, "It is a blessing to wake up with both my kids. God has surely been good to me. He's been better than I have been to myself."

She said recovering from substance use means changing the situations of your life, but it also means more than that. "You have to change the people, places and things, but if I've not changed within me, I haven't done anything at all."

Ms. White said Ms. Ratliff needed someone to believe in her so that she could believe in herself. "She needed that confidence that someone believed in her," Ms. White said. "She is a prime example of why we do this work. It's to tackle struggles and to move forward. Work through the lows and celebrate the highs."

Ms. Ratliff is very clear that her recovery and success was a team effort with Ms. White.

Ms. White recalls that Aishia was very patient with the process and kept reassuring her that she was focused on taking care of Heavyn and maintaining her sobriety.

The date of 11/13/20 will forever be one Ms. Ratliff remembers. It was on this date that Ms. White called Ms. Ratliff to tell her the case was successfully closed. "She was reduced to tears, started thanking me over and over again and said, "God is good, according to Ms. White." I said, "Congratulations Aishia! All your hard work has paid off! You did it!!!!" And through her tears she said, "no, we did it!" I wished her and her family the best and reminded her to keep moving forward."

Ms. Ratliff was equally clear about why she wanted to tell her story.

"Whatever I can do to help another mother bring her child home, I'm willing to do that," she said.

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## **Isaiah's Permanent Supports**

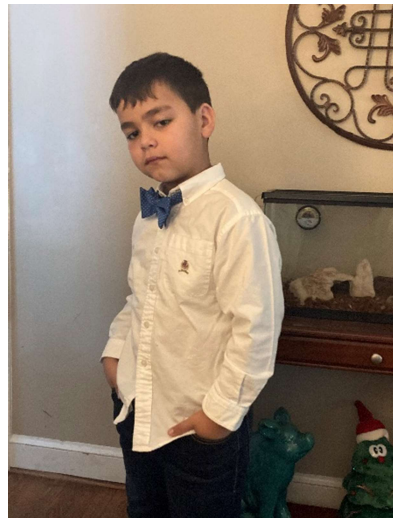




This holiday season, the Parizo family is officially a little bigger as on Adoption Day, their son, Isaiah, had his adoption finalized. It was a journey to get here but one a committed family embraced for this special little boy.

Ann and Kevin Parizo are adoptive parents to twin boys - who joined their family in 2006. They have fostered 13 children over the years and their family has been a "home" for many during the holidays.

As an infant, Isaiah was initially placed with kin and eventually into the Parizo's family with the goal of being reunified back into his mother's care. Through the turbulent times, the Parizo home was a safe haven and a consistent refuge for this little boy. He was surrounded by people he knew and who were committed to his well-being.



In 2017, Isaiah was reunified with his mother and the Parizo's embraced maintaining contact with him and his mother. Little did they realize how important that relationship would prove to be.

Due to a number of extenuating circumstances, in 2018 Isaiah again was in need of support. The Parizo's and Isaiah's mother agreed that it was in his best interests to be placed back into the Parizo home.

This arrangement was made between two mothers - a birth and a foster mother, keeping this little boy's best interests in mind.

"They have always had an open door for Isaiah," said DCF Social Worker, Laura Thompson.

Ms. Parizo explained that she stayed in close touch with Isaiah's Mom throughout Isaiah's time in care, hoping he would be able to go back home but the family was more than willing to be his forever home. She and her husband make a strong team and agree on the involvement of Isaiah's family and the supports for this little boy requires.

"She is a serious advocate for Isaiah," said Ms. Thompson explaining that Ms. Parizo ensures that his educational, medical and mental health needs are met. "She makes my job as the social worker easier. Isaiah's needs are always met in a timely manner," added Ms. Thompson.



Isaiah's mother knew the Parizo's would adopt him.

One issue the family did address, and will the rest of Isaiah's life, is that he is a Hispanic little boy placed into a White home. Ms. Parizo explained that the color of a child's skin bears no influence on the love and the acceptance that a child receives in their home. Providing love and stability when they needed it most is how she has explained her commitment to the foster care program. The Parizo's already adopted two African American boys.



"The family is very aware of the challenges of having to raise children of color. As a result, they are very careful to instill very strong values," according to the Parizo's FASU social worker, Marcia Macklin.

The Parizo's adopted Isaiah on National Adoption Day but Isaiah's relationship with his Mother continues moving forward. He calls her occasionally and on his first day of school, the Parizo's sent pictures to her of Isaiah in his new school outfit!

One child, two loving families - home for the holidays.

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## Ghana - My Home Again for the Holidays



Social Worker Brittany Roberts is described as having an energy that is infectious, a motivation to learn and a heart that truly cares.

It would take all of these traits and a team of individuals to assist an 11-year-old little girl to return to Ghana - her home for the holidays. This is a story of family engagement, kinship, racial justice and equity of supports all occurring during a pandemic.

In October 2019, Willsy Smith traveled with her father from Ghana, Africa to the United States where she was left in the care of a family friend in New York City. Her father never told Willsy's mom, Antoinette Smith, about this plan that her young daughter would be left in another country almost 5,000 miles away. "The father said he wanted to travel with my daughter for two weeks. I knew traveling is a good experience, I let her go. When he came home without her, it was awful. I felt helpless," explained Ms. Smith. "She's my only daughter in the whole world."

The extended family gathered support and a maternal aunt, Belinda, flew from Ghana to NYC with the intention of reunifying Willsy with her family. It was then learned that Willsy's father took her passport with him and she could not leave the United States. Belinda brought Willsy to a family friend as she herself could only stay in Connecticut for a short period of time.

A call was placed to the Department of Children and Families when it was learned Willsy was without a legal guardian in the United States. After initially placing Willsy into foster care, the Department made the decision to vest an Order of Temporary Custody in a family friend, Dorcus Mesah, so that decisions about Willsy's school and medical care could rest with her. Ms. Mesah was considered Willsy's kin, and a family with whom she was familiar. Willsy was able to move into the Mesah home but this living arrangement was not easy. "Of course, I said yes but it's been very, very hard," said Ms. Mesah who has three children of her own.



Enter Brittany Roberts. "The family embraced me as soon as I walked into their lives. We were like family," explained Ms. Roberts. "This was such an interesting case with so many details, I learned so much," she added.

Willsy began receiving behavioral health supports and her education was arranged. She received medical care while awaiting the next steps.

Yet, the barriers to having the family together again were complicated. Ms. Smith was in Ghana, and eventually travelled to the United States under her visa in February 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic then hit and travel back to Ghana was stopped. During this time, Ms. Smith's visa expired, and it was confirmed that Willsy could not leave the country without her passport which remained in the possession of her father who was not responsive to the family or Department's contact.

The family then suffered further trauma. In addition to Willsy, Ms. Mesah also took in her niece during this time as her own sister contracted COVID-19. Ms. Mesah explained that when the children would go to school each day, she would spend her days at the hospital with her sister. Emotional and with much remorse, shared that her sister passed away. "I felt helpless because I was not allowed to visit her anymore because of COVID. My sister didn't understand why I was no longer coming. She died alone. It was devastating for all of us," stated Ms. Mesah. Yet, she maintained the strength to care for 5 children.

Brittany Roberts only worked harder.

"Brittany reminds me there is no can't in CPS," said Program Manager, Gerard Downes, adding – "nothing stopped her. Pandemic problems, Brittany found a way to overcome them. Immigration issues in a pandemic, they didn't stop Brittany. Medical challenges, Brittany found a way."



Ms. Roberts was determined to help a family return to their homeland. "Her ability to build rapport with this family, enough so that they trusted her efforts to get them home, was amazing," explained Rodney Moore, Brittany's Supervisor. "She always had the family's culture at the forefront of her mind."



Once the legal process became clearer, a plan was in place to help Ms. Smith and Willsy return to Ghana. The OTC was vacated, and Ms. Smith remained in Connecticut with her. Ms. Roberts spent a lot of time speaking with the authorities at the Ghana Consulate, who granted a "permission to travel" certificate for Willsy in absence of her passport. Ms. Smith's visa was renewed, and she purchased the airplane tickets with DCF covering the costs of the COVID testing, pre and post, travel. A date was set.

However, the plan was again delayed after a routine medical exam revealed a concern over Willsy's vision and she was referred to an eye specialist. A recommendation was made for eye surgery to occur in Connecticut to lengthen one of Willsy's eye muscles with a hope to alleviate her other eye from overcompensating. "It was not believed this procedure could be done in Ghana.

"There was a real fear that Willsy would lose vision in one of her eyes," explained Ms. Roberts. "We just didn't feel right about sending her home without addressing these concerns," she added. Glasses were prescribed for Willsy and the surgery was performed. According to Ms. Smith, Willsy is doing very well since the surgery and they are very anxious to return home.

"Working with the family has been a pleasure," Brittany said. "They were very transparent and welcomed me with open arms. With the help and support of my management team, we were able to work collaboratively and help the family get the proper medical attention and assist them in getting back to Ghana, despite being in a pandemic."



"Brittany took initiative and knew when to reach out for support," explained Program Supervisor Downes. "Brittany used child protective services resources and kinship support to reunite a mother and daughter, helping them find a safe and healthy path home, together. "

On 12/26/20, Ms. Smith and Willsy returned to Ghana.

Home.