

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



## A Message from Commissioner Dorantes

Our July edition of "Spotlight on What's Right" newsletter highlights the collaborative efforts between the Department of Children and Families and our community partners which have resulted in positive outcomes for families.

We do nothing in isolation...

Each month, we intend to share successes experienced as we work together. These 'stories' come from you and our provider network as we continue to celebrate families who are strengthened and healing while children remain safely at home or are returned to a family setting. As I considered this message, a few thoughts came to my mind....

First, I can never say enough about how much I appreciate our DCF workforce. You strive each day to find creative ways to enhance the lives of the children and families we serve - THANK YOU!!!

Our community partners also work diligently to adapt to the ever-changing environment around us--- They meet families where they are and create a bridge of support over the rough waters. At the same time, our providers offer ongoing input & suggestions on our service delivery system across the state and into Department operations - THANK YOU!!!

The African proverb used to inspire the quote in this rubber-ducky pic, is often uttered as affirmation to reflect not only our professional work but also our personal interactions. I challenge us to espouse the meaning of true village people. Communities need more support and less surveillance and are craving for us to SEE them as true partners. Ironically, in each of the stories you will read in this edition, the individual interviewed mentions that it took "a village" to assist these children and their families to reach success. This theme permeates the stories and illustrates what can be accomplished when we work together authentically.

You will read about an adolescent being adopted, a removal that is prevented, and a father and son reunified -- breaking the intergenerational cycle of neglect. Ask ourselves... with a different type of partnership, earlier in their lives, would there have even been a cycle to break?

For the three families highlighted, we also see the results of providing equitable supports. Do we strive to ensure equity towards each family and child we serve? Of course, as service delivery models should be implemented in the same manner to ensure their fidelity. Yet, what if a family needs more than what is being traditionally provided? Or if those working with the family seek to understand the complex individual histories through an empathetic lens? These stories show us what happens when interventions are approached that way.

Equitable treatment is not the same as equal treatment. With an equity lens, we provide what is needed for a specific family to reach a goal ... even if that means one child or family receives more than another. An equitable system results in positive outcomes for everyone. See if you can spot the results of an equity approach in the stories we share this month. The details are nestled in our everyday interactions with families yet they require us to tune-in to that need on purpose.

What were the outcomes for each of these families? The path home for these children was different. The supports needed were equitable and everyone appears to be better off as a result.

Thank you once again for your collective efforts - Children and families are in a better place because of our work TOGETHER.



## "Good man, good father, positive role model"



Tyrese Cloud "cried like a baby" after the first visit with his son, "Terrance", who was placed into foster care. An experience he "wouldn't wish on any parent." This caused him to re-live parts of his own childhood. The years spent in group homes and the former DCF State Receiving Home, without the steady presence of his own father in his life.

He was determined not to allow his son to be a "victim to the system." The cycle needed to be broken.

Tyrese is our teacher regarding the lessons of equitable supports and the successes which follow, when we focus on what someone can do versus what they cannot.

These values are exemplified by social worker, Loren Papagoda, from the New Haven Office. While working with Tyrese, their early relationship was not easy. As Tyrese missed court hearings and other meetings, it was apparent he was "overwhelmed with DCF requirements," according to Loren and "lost in the legal process."

She believed in him.

Yet, what Tyrese Cloud did have was a desire to not allow his 2-year-old son to grow up without him. Match this with the mindset of a worker who in earnest sets out to break the negative stereotypes of men as parents and who believes that they should be given the "same opportunities as a mother." Together you have a forceful team. The trust was built.

"She is a very understanding person," Tyrese stated about Loren. "She allowed me space to open."

Tyrese speaks emphatically of how Loren encouraged him. Pushed him. During one of the first visits he had with Terrance, Tyrese stated Loren looked right at him and said, "you are gonna get through this" and "you are going to get him back."

Tyrese Cloud was in good hands. The work could not be done in isolation.

It was Loren who worked diligently to assemble a team to support Tyrese towards the goal of reunification. One could say a "village" was formed around him.

Little Terrance needed his father - everyday.



Karen Swanson, Case Manager  
Enna Garcia, Clinical Coordinator

While the Department of Children and Families is the child protective services agency, DCF is one part of the overall child protective services system. With a wide array of contracted and non-contracted services, individuals like Tyrese Cloud are afforded family-specific supports.

The Department's efforts with families are aided by 'r kids Family Center in New Haven. Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time (RTFT) is one of their programs designed to assist parents in reunifying with their children. According to Executive Director Randi Ruben-Rodriguez, approximately 90% of the families referred to their program for reunification successfully reunified. This seemed to be a perfect match for Tyrese and Terrance.

Establishing that relationship with Tyrese took time. Enna Garcia, Director of Programs, Kathy Hagearty, Clinical Coordinator, and Karen Swanson, Case Manager, worked closely with him. They looked at his strengths, what he was doing to become stronger. They even went as far as teaching him how to utilize ZOOM for virtual visits. According to Enna, "all he needed was a little hand," as he had the desire.

Before entering the private sector, Enna and Karen had a combined 33 years of experience working for DCF. What were their experiences now looking from the outside in? Loren was meeting Tyrese "exactly where he was at," according to Enna and "pushing



Kathy Hagearty  
r'kids

him to be the best father he could be." With the New Haven DCF team, Karen felt they had, "complete collaboration," when it came to decision making and "supervisors very present in meetings" allowed the entire process to work even better.



Jysean Duncan  
The Children's Community  
Programs of Connecticut

Time went on and Tyrese was achieving his goals. With pride, he talked of his organization, seeing Terrance, and yearning for that day when his little boy could come home.

Tyrese was also assisted by 'r kids with tangible items such as food, a bed and sheets, chairs and gates to protect Terrance from falling down the stairs.

With 'r kids and DCF working closely with Tyrese, one additional component was needed to assist him and 'r kids suggested to the team that Tyrese would benefit from the Family Check Up Parenting Program through Children's Community Programs. Funded by the Office of Early Childhood, the focus is on "early intervention," according to Program Director Galit Sharma. The program consists of "positive behavior support, setting effective limits and building family relationships," Galit stated. She had the perfect match for Tyrese in a staff member who himself was a father.

Jysean Duncan was assigned to work with the family to further aid the reunification process. A father himself, he described their work as a "wonderful experience," and while joining with Tyrese, "we learn together and grow together as fathers."

According to Tyrese, Jysean is a "very nice person" and it was especially helpful to have someone who was also a father themselves working with him. Those efforts consisted of countless hours talking about potty training, setting limits and bedtime routines over and over again.

The day finally came when Terrance could go home. "It took a village," stated Loren when asked how this day came. A village of supports. Given the pandemic, a virtual assessment was done one last time on Tyrese's apartment. It was safe. Loren described her emotions that day and being "so relieved" Terrance went home! This was her first reunification but certainly not her last.

Thanks to the collaborative efforts, Tyrese Cloud now puts Terrance to bed every night. For Terrance, his father's face is the last one he sees before he goes to sleep and the first one he sees when he awakes. Tyrese describes his little boy as a "happy kid and happy to be home."

"He loves me," Tyrese stated and "wants to be with me all the time." Those words are spoken by a grown man about his son. It is hard not to believe Tyrese himself wouldn't have had those same feelings towards his own father - the one he yearned to have a consistent presence in his life while he was in and out of placement.

Systems evolve over time. Decades ago, fathers were not engaged, pursued to care for their children or offered an array of services. What would Tyrese's life be like if those systems were in place when he was a child? What permanency could he have experienced?

As a result of the partnership between the Department of Children and Families, 'r kids Family Center and Children's Community Programs (CCP), the intergenerational cycle of neglect in this family has been broken. A little boy is being raised by his father. Tyrese's days with Terrance are filled with walks to the park, playing games and his wish to buy his son a Power Wheels car. Just like the one he never had as a child. When Tyrese was asked what he would say to other parents involved with DCF, his statements were quite clear. "Don't think a lot of yourself, think a lot of your child," and "do what you need to do."



Galit Sharma  
The Children's Community  
Programs of Connecticut

Tyrese Cloud is an example of what can happen with the right supports at the right time when agencies come together towards a common goal. Simply wanting to do better, Tyrese achieved what he set out to accomplish and so much more. Someday, little Terrance may not remember the names of Loren, Randi, Enna, Kathy, Karen, Galit and Jysean. He may not be able to say "thank you" to the people who supported his father and who allow him to receive hugs and kisses from a man who so desperately wanted to raise him. Yet, he forever will feel their presence and the impact they played on his life.

When asked how he would like people to think of him, Tyrese did not hesitate in his response... "Good man, good father, positive role model."

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## "Ricardos Village"

A FaceTime call on a Friday afternoon ended a tense two days. On one end of the phone was a social worker with a sign that read, "Happy Early Birthday - You Were Adopted Today." On the other end was an adoptive parent and a youth, both who broke down into tears. "Ricardo" was adopted 5 minutes before the Juvenile Court ended its proceedings, in a closed session on the other side of the state, 1 day before his 18th birthday during the COVID-19 pandemic. His adoption certificate was hand delivered by his DCF social worker, Cindi Putney, wearing Personal Protective Equipment.

This is a story of a long journey during which a "village" of supports came together to assist a young man in finding his permanent home. It is also about "permanency" in a different way, describing the lifelong relationship established between a DCF worker and an adoptive parent who forever will be joined by loss, devotion, career dreams, a broken tie rod and a cardinal that appeared in a tree.

Read on about "Ricardo's Village."

As a young child, life did not go quite as planned for Ricardo. The early losses and an uncertain future he endured manifested in multiple ways. To support him, the Department partnered with the Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) program administered by Family and Children's Aid (FCA) in Danbury. Designed for youth requiring a higher level of supports, the TFC program is one of many the Department of Children and Families contracts with as part of public/private partnerships in the community.

Enter Mindy Solomon, FCA Program Supervisor, who became one of the constants in Ricardo's life. Working with Ricardo since he was 11 years of age allowed her to see his strengths and the connections he required. When Mindy first met Ricardo, he was a scared little boy who would urinate in his foster parent's shoes with the hopes this would lead to his return home.

Could Mindy have imagined his adoption day years later? What would Mindy's message be about the work with our youth? "Worth it. All days are worth it," she said.

As his time in care went on, it was clear Ricardo was in need of permanency. The right family. Enter another member of Ricardo's village- Shantel Dubois.

Growing up in a difficult neighborhood in New York, Shantel decided to become a foster parent after seeing her own mother take in her friends who at times were homeless and hungry. Her mother became their mother. Foster care is "my calling," she stated and has been a "blessing for me."

Shantel is known for teaching much-needed life skills to the youth who enter her family. As a foster parent for 7 years, she has cared for over 10 children. To each, she brings the balance of nurturing and consistency. "Her heart is absolutely in this for children," according to Mindy. She is "genuine and authentic."



With supports from FCA and Shantel's experience, the match and placement were made.

A key member of Ricardo's village is Cindi Putney. Described by her colleagues as a "true social worker," this 26-year veteran of the Department of Children and Families views her life's work as more than just a job. She is humble and embodies inherent values - not ones able to be taught or learned - into each action with a child and family.

Cindi has worked with Ricardo and Shantel for 18 months. According to Shantel, "she was meant to come into our lives." Mindy describes Cindi as "amazing" and, in regards to Ricardo,

"pushed for his best interests in everything."

It was Cindi who advocated, did not give up and, despite Ricardo being an older youth in care, clearly stated it is "so not true" that adolescents cannot be adopted. She recognized the permanency he required to be successful. "When she advocates for a kid, she advocates," according to Shantel.



Repeated permanency conversations occurred with Ricardo and his team during which "everything was put on the table," according to Mindy. She encourages anyone who takes part in those conversations to ask all questions since some barriers to permanency may not be obvious and we should not assume what others are thinking - especially when it comes to adolescents.

After years of support, closure on past issues and the clarification of his relationships moving forward, it was Ricardo who stated, "I want to be adopted." Pause for a moment - an adolescent who wants to be adopted? Unique given he was now 17 years of age.

The adoption paperwork started in the Summer of 2019.

During that time, the relationship between Cindi and Shantel became more than just a DCF worker and an adoptive parent. They supported each other as Shantel lost her mother and Cindi lost her husband. "We cried and hugged," said Cindi. Shantel described how when Cindi was out of work after her husband's death, she "still called me and asked what I needed." Two women, so strong.

It was Cindi who pushed Shantel to go back to school and earn her bachelor's degree in Human Services to pursue her dream of setting up a program for pregnant teenagers. When speaking of the example Cindi has set, Shantel clearly stated Cindi. "would be the worker that I would want to be. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Unexpected barriers took place which caused the adoption process to be delayed. According to Shantel, "things just kept happening." Uncertainly loomed into Spring 2020. Could the adoption be achieved during the pandemic? Ricardo would turn 18 years of age in May. Would it be finalized?

Cindi continued to think, "this was his mom" and "something they wanted." She was determined more than ever to get this done. Ricardo's village now extended to multiple staff within the Waterbury DCF office, DCF Central Office Adoption and Subsidy Unit, the private provider community, the Attorney General's Office and the Judicial Department (See [Ricardo's "Village," - everyone who assisted with his adoption](#)). According to Cindi, "they were amazing." His team was able to secure a date for the adoption to be finalized - a Friday afternoon closed hearing in a court on the other side of the state.

Cindi was "full of emotions" and even "panic stricken" leading up to his adoption day. Shantel stated her "stomach was in knots" and called Cindi Friday morning waiting for the news whether or not the Judge signed the paperwork.

Then came the text message on Cindi's phone with the picture of the signed Adoption Certificate! Then the FaceTime call to Ricardo and Shantel - reducing both to tears.

Ricardo was adopted!

The celebration the following day was complete with a sign in the front yard which read "Happy Birthday and Adoption Day" adding to the mini parade down his street with cars honking and other signs.

An 18-year old young man adopted one day before his birthday.

There was also more to that day.....

Cindi was almost late given the tie rod broke on her wheel close to Shantel's house, disabling her vehicle. No barrier could stop her from celebrating or, as we saw, from having Ricardo adopted.

In a quiet moment, Shantel was asked what she would like to say to Cindi. Through tears her message was, "I love you Cindi. We love you. Thank you."

As the day ended, a cardinal, known as a representative of a loved one who has passed, appeared in a tree close to where Cindi was standing. "That was my husband and Shantel's mom," Cindi reflects back.

Ricardo's Village .....Permanency



Mindy Solomon  
Family and Children's Aid

## Leading with Compassion - The Saint Joseph Parenting Center



Nelson and Nicolas

Three-year-old Nicolas was at risk of being brought back into the care of the Department for the second time. Perhaps the last chance to prevent this traumatic experience would be for his father, Nelson, to participate in a considered removal meeting in the Norwalk Office. Nelson made his presence known. The Department was impressed by his ability to advocate for himself and his young son. Nelson recognized that he needed supports.

"It is hard being a single parent, both mom and dad, but I am willing to learn because my son deserves it and means the world to me," Nelson stated. Like many other fathers, Nelson grew up without the strong presence of his own father. He stated, "unfortunately, my father was not a present figure in my life, but I want to learn how to be a better dad for my son."

The familiar African Proverb "it takes a village" recognizes that we need the help and support from an entire community of different people interacting with children, in order for them to grow up in a safe environment and experience life in a healthy manner.

Who could be a part of the village for a single father and his son?

The Saint Joseph Parenting Center (SJPC) in Stamford has partnered with the Department of Children and Families since 2010. With their vision and mission aligned with the work DCF performs each day, their staff seek to "strengthen families that are at risk of child abuse and neglect by providing parenting education and support."

Nelson was referred to SJPC by the Department in the spring of 2020. He was enrolled in the 24/7 DADS program - a 12-week program that meets once a week developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative. This program focuses on the important role Dads play in their children's lives. The topics reviewed include; The Father's role, Children's growth, Showing and Handling Feelings and others.

It seemed like a perfect match.

It was also a perfect match for the Saint Joseph Parenting Center to hire their new Executive Director, Rhonda Neal, a year earlier. "This is personal. I want families to know there is hope despite circumstances whether you live on Park Avenue or a park bench. I am grateful that I get the awesome chance to pass down what was freely given to me" she stated.

It is within partnerships that the most valuable and sustaining work is completed within our communities. While the Department is one entity, community-based programs provide a critical need to families far greater than what may be readily apparent.

The collaboration between DCF and SJPC includes case managers participating in many facets of the work. This includes attending Administrative Case Review meetings, attending court hearings, engaging in regular updated conversations and providing monthly written reports. According to Rhonda, "the benefit of our relationship is that sometimes SJPC is able to identify deep seeded issues that may not surface immediately due to fear of unknown consequences."

Saint Joseph Parenting Center case managers also work closely with DCF clients and social workers to achieve permanency goals as described by DCF guidelines. Their programs serve as a community resource center where parents learn the skills and tools needed to achieve reunification.

The work is that much more powerful when two agencies have aligned values.

Despite the pandemic, Rhonda said that her agency accepted their highest number of DCF referrals in March and April, which she explained to be "a reflection of the hard work and strong desire we have to growing our partnership."



Heaven-Lee Trenard  
Treatment Social Worker

A major support to Nelson was Heaven – Lee Trenard, a Treatment Social Worker from Norwalk DCF. In working with Nelson, she explained, “St. Joseph's Parenting Center takes on the Department of Children and Families clients with compassion and goes above and beyond to ensure the safety of our children. I always have had a positive experience working with this agency because I feel that they bridge the gap between the Department and clients.”

Nelson became a stronger parent. With food, books and an activity backpack being provided for Nicolas, he and his father began settling in as a family. It is recognized that parenting is not easy. Supports may need to continue throughout the different developmental stages of a child's life. " SJPC has helped in many ways but I am especially grateful for the parenting classes which I took in order to get my son back. These classes gave me a guide to develop a healthy relationship with my son," Nelson stated.

The parenting model used at SJPC is the community style learning. They create a non-judgmental and safe place for parents to connect. A shared meal is part of the experience enabling parents, volunteers and staff to interact with one another. Rhonda explained that “as testament to the level of care and respect we place on our clients, many reengage in classes or case management as their child grows older and/or they face a new life challenge.”

Nelson required some individual supports during this time as well. "As part of SJPC case management services, I was referred to a therapist who helped me address and understand how my anger issues could lead to the domestic violence," he stated.



**Saint Joseph Parenting Center  
Executive Director Rhonda Neal**

Rhonda Neal further stated, "parents gladly come to SJPC because they know that they will be loved and not judged, respected and not treated like a number and that we work hard to help them achieve their goals. Working collegiately with DCF addressing hard family issues is how we live out our mission to prevent child abuse and neglect and bring about the best outcomes for families.”

What has Nelson learned during this work? "The importance of having good communications and being there for my son is how I can help build his confidence and self-esteem. For me, that means getting involved in his school, sports, friends and spending quality time together," he stated.

Shortly before Nelson came into the Saint Joseph Parenting Center family, Rhonda Neal lost her father. "Unfortunately, I lost my hero, my dad to a terminal illness on January 14, 2020. I miss him greatly but know I get to live out his legacy through the work SJPC does to strengthen and empower families.”

Legacy - What we leave onto others which impacts them far beyond when we are physically present.

The legacy for Saint Joseph Parenting Center is that a little boy named Nicolas can experience the love and affection of his Father due to their compassionate efforts.

What is his message to all of us?

"Through working with DCF and SJPC, I was able to get my son back and will always be grateful," Nelson stated.