

November 2020

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



**NATIONAL ADOPTION AWARENESS MONTH**

**Commissioner's Message**



Adoption offers the opportunity to celebrate families and yet it is only one way to secure permanence for children.

This year's National Adoption Month theme is "Engage Youth: Listen and Learn." For many years, CT DCF has provided youth in foster care the opportunity to tell us how to improve services through our statewide youth advisory boards. No single lesson is more important than knowing that children thrive best when in a permanent family to support, guide and love them consistently.

We know that adoptions are one form of legal permanence. The journey to get to adoption is often bittersweet as it begins with parents in some sort of crisis.

This month's Spotlight gives us a glimpse into the families who stepped forward along a sometimes-bumpy road to open their hearts and homes to children in need.

You will read about blended families who always had room for 'one more'; kinship adoption with paternal family members; and the ultimate 'village' to a family composed of support from literally around the world!

I beamed with pride as our social workers were shown appreciation from the court, parents and children for their dedicated work culminated on CT Adoption Day. That appreciation was also extended to our provider partners who work alongside us with families.



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Well, gratitude for partnership goes both ways.

Adoption Day is sometimes the 'feel-good' day of the year in court because there are children dressed up, balloons, cupcakes and media interviews of nervous parents about the final step in what is *typically* a lengthy, emotionally draining process.

2020 is anything but *typical*.

This year, on Nov 20th, with the pandemic threatening any shred of normalcy, remarkable efforts were put forth by the juvenile court judges and court personnel in the 7 courthouses across Connecticut, that hosted **virtual** adoption hearings for over 20 children and their forever families.

This Spotlight highlights not only the preparation by Judicial to pull this day off without a hitch but also the representation from the other two branches of CT government. Along with members of the CT DCF Executive Team, Lt Gov Susan Bysiewicz 'travelled' around the state, remotely logging-in to proceedings as did a few legislators from CT's General Assembly to witness the final legalization of the adoptions.

As we reflect, we need to remember and also celebrate the other ways permanency is secured for children. While we can be proud to have finalized 663 adoptions last year, let's also celebrate the 782 reunifications that took place during that same period.

Children in foster care are supported by DCF, therapeutic provider agencies, foster care collaboratives and the CT Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families — celebrating 25yrs of service this year.

UConn's Adoption Assistance Program <https://health.uconn.edu/adoption-assistance/> is also an invaluable resource partner.

Did you know that about 60 percent of children who are removed are reunited with their parents? Or that over 43% of children in CT's care currently are placed with relatives/kin or someone they know.

Also not widely known, is more than 90 percent of children served by CT DCF remain safely at home.

All these forms of permanency - keeping families intact, reunification, transfer of guardianship - as well as adoption should be done timely with the child's well-being at the center of decisions.

CTDCF respects and honors family constellations of all types, races and configurations. The safety and stability of children takes all of us, in partnership, committed towards strengthening families.



## Adoption is Love and the Sanzos are the Proof

People who adopt children from foster care are very special. Could it be that they just have more love to give than those of us who don't?

If anyone wants to make that case, Exhibit A is Whitney Sanzo, who lives with her husband Michael and her seven children in Granby.

Yes, seven. They are children she gave birth to, adopted and fostered. She loves them all the same and with all her heart.

In 2007, Whitney and Michael, who started as college sweethearts, had a daughter, Addy, who is now age 13. After the birth, the couple had difficulty getting pregnant again, and they decided a good alternative would be to adopt children in foster care.

"We weren't getting pregnant fast enough," Whitney remembered. "So we pursued both paths - having our own child and adopting."

In 2010, the pair got licensed as foster parents by the Department of Children and Families. Since then, the Sanzos fostered a total of 25 children, including respite and emergency care. Some of the children had complex medical needs and others were parts of sibling groups. Most of those children were returned home, and others went to other homes.

And then there were four who never left.



In 2011, Anthony, a little boy in foster care, was placed by the Department in the Sanzo home. About 17 months later, they adopted Anthony, who is now 10 years old.

In 2012, the Department placed Alan, then an infant in foster care, with the Sanzos. Then just six months later, the Department brought Sammy, a baby girl, to the home.

At that point in 2012, the family included a birth child, an adopted child, and two children in foster care.

So, of course, in the inexplicable way the world can work, Whitney got pregnant. She gave birth to Ella in January 2013. That would not be the last addition.

Having already adopted Anthony in 2012, the Sanzos would adopt Sammy in 2015 and then Alan in 2019.

"It was the craziest time and happiest time in my life," Whitney said. "It was the most important thing I could do. It was so fulfilling."

In March 2017, the Department brought 3-month old A.J. to the Sanzo family. On November 20, the day that is celebrated as Adoption Day, Whitney and Michael adopted A.J., who turns four in December. Due to the pandemic, the legal proceeding to finalize the adoption occurred remotely through a video conferencing platform. In total, over 20 children were adopted statewide on Adoption Day.

"It's a great day. We've been looking forward to it for a while," Michael said. "He is an awesome kid and we are happy to have him finally a part of our family permanently."



A.J. is the fourth child the couple adopted - joining the two girls that Whitney birthed. Oh, yes, there is also A.J.'s brother who was placed in the home as a foster child and who is expected to be reunified with his mother.

Some families can't handle the emotional rollercoaster of foster care - where not knowing if a child is going to be reunified or become available for adoption is common.

Whitney said, however, that building a beneficial relationship with birth parents has been a big part of her satisfaction with caring for children in foster care.

"I was always really comfortable developing relationships with parents and extended families," she said. "Sure, we wanted to grow our family. But we also understand the Department needs foster caregivers and most important that there will always be children who need them. It is about loving these children like your own, while also realizing it can be temporary."

Whitney said she loves caring for the children but also advocating for them. "I just felt like what I was doing was so important, and I really loved that." She has a strong partner in her husband, Michael.

Another joy about adopting and fostering for Whitney is the relationships that develops among the children themselves - regardless of how they entered the family.

"They all look out for each other," she said. "Everyone chips in. We work as a team to get things done."

With the adoption now complete and Thanksgiving right around the corner, what is next for the Sanzo family? "It will be a great time to celebrate for AJ and just enjoy some time together," Michael stated.

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## Long Road To Love

It took more than three years for Kelley Swift to adopt her little boy Jackson, whom the Department of Children and Families (DCF) brought to her home in June 2017 just a month after his birth. The wait - while Jackson was happily in her home - was hard but the result was perfect, and the adoption was final on November 20, 2020, which was when Connecticut celebrates Adoption Day.

"This child is the love of my life," said Ms. Swift of Fairfield. "I couldn't have had a better social worker and team. DCF worked so hard and I had an outstanding social worker, and it still took more than three years."

That social worker, Kiara Rosario, received high praise from Ms. Swift during the adoption ceremony. "I wish every child could be so lucky to have a social worker like you," she stated. "Quite literally, you saved his life."

Ms. Swift, a former prosecutor who now works for the United Nations, said, "I always wanted a child, but my life led me on a path I didn't expect." In her early 40s, Ms. Swift began considering international adoption but learned how difficult it had become. "So many countries closed external adoptions," she said, and in 2016, she decided to get licensed by the Department as a pre-adoptive home. "I was in it solely to adopt a child," she said.

Jackson would be her one and only child.

Ms. Swift picked up Jackson from the hospital and brought him home at just five weeks old. "It was pretty scary," she said. "But I have an incredible support system. It's a big village, and I've gotten close with people in the foster care network and other pre-adoptive families who adopted." One of Jackson's best friends, only three weeks younger, also was adopted, said Ms. Swift. In addition, Ms. Swift's closest friend is a lawyer who adopted a child five months older than Jackson.



"My whole life led me to this point," Ms. Swift said. "All the difficulties and uncertainties were worth it. I see that little face - he's remarkable -- so funny and smart. What a character! He has such a personality."

Jackson loves sports and being active, and he loves his community. "He's very friendly, and everybody knows him in the neighborhood," Ms. Swift said.



The adoption proceeding is the legal recognition of the family's permanent bond, she said. On adoption day, Ms. Swift had over 50 people attend the virtual court hearing from across the country, and from around the world! Her family and friends joined from New Jersey, Oregon, New York, Rhode Island, Copenhagen, Vienna, Canada, London, Brussels and Serbia.

The adoption proceeding was also attended by Jackson's the Birth to Three worker who "... in a sense co-parented with me," said Ms. Swift. The virtual hearing also included Jackson's former day care provider as well as members of the CT state legislature, Representative Cristin McCarthy Vahey, and Representative Brian Farnen.

"It means we have our family finalized and official," Ms. Swift said. "I couldn't love him more, and I'm happy to finally have him mine."

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## ***"He brings us so much joy."***



For Nydia Roldan, a mother of two grown children who are now in their mid-20's, traveling with her partner, Jose, was her new pastime. "Jose and I were beginning to spend some weekends away. With my kids who are now young adults, I had some time for myself," she stated.

Those plans quickly changed when Jose's relative gave birth to a baby boy and DCF asked for their support. "Leeland spent his first three weeks in a foster home until he was placed in my home," explained Nydia, who understood the placement to be a temporary special study arrangement until his Mom could get the help that she needed. Unfortunately, Leeland's Mom was unable to safely care for Leeland and Nydia was asked to adopt him. "He became my priority. It has been all hands-on deck for Jose and me since the first day Leeland joined our family. We could never do this alone."



Nydia works full time and depends on the love and support of her grown children and

extended family. "It's amazing to be a big sister again, that's something I've always taken pride in having an older brother," said Nydia's daughter, Emily, who is 25 years old.



Social Worker Kelly Stratton stated the family embraced Leeland from the beginning. "When Leeland was placed in their care they immediately took the reins as caretakers. The family handled all aspects of his needs. The love they have for Leeland was evident and we're so happy they are now a forever family," she stated.

At the adoption hearing, Nydia expressed her thanks for Kelly and her efforts.

"Thank God for people like you," she stated.



During the hearing, it was Jose who had Leeland sit on his lap. His arms wrapped around this little boy who now who has found a permanent home. "Cheese," Jose stated as the camera pointed at Leeland. It was Jose's claps which could be heard in the background as Leeland danced when the proceedings were over.

Although Nydia and Jose never expected to be starting all over again and raising a baby boy, they can't imagine their home without Leeland. "He brings us so much joy, they said.

"Today is a relief, it is so surreal to know that he is all ours."





## Gratitude Starts Here!

GRATITUDE ... in a most unique circumstance

November 20th was CT Adoption Day.

This year, with the pandemic threatening any shred of normalcy, remarkable efforts were put forth by the juvenile court judges and court personnel in the 7 courthouses across Connecticut, that hosted **virtual** adoption hearings.

Members of the CT DCF Exec Team 'travelled' around the state, remotely logging-in to proceedings presided over by Judge Conway, Judge Lobo, Judge Westbrook and Judge Wilkerson-Brilliant. We were **blown away** by the care taken by each of these judges to make this occasion, individualized & memorable for the each of the families involved.

Some highlights witnessed were:

- Displaying an electronic copy of the adoption decree on screen.
- Slowing the proceeding to allow for freshly-minted grandparents, who were visibly moved by the experience, to take in the uniqueness of the moment in reflection.
- Sharing a very moving heart-stirring letter of 'advice' from an adopted parent to the anxious 'new' parents about the wonders of adoption.
- Welcoming the media, legislators, entire virtual classrooms, and throngs of well-wishers while gently explaining the expected decorum of court proceedings.
- Personally acknowledging all of the **50** participants in the virtual courtroom by canvassing them each on their relationship to the family (that *particular hearing had participants from throughout the US and around the world from Canada, London, Serbia, Brussels, Copenhagen and Vienna!*)
- Indulging shy, boisterous, and inquisitive children each with care and patience; some of whom only know judges by their gavels!
- Displaying genuine gratitude to the adoptive parents, their children, the village of supporters, DCF staff, the Assistant Attorneys Generals and other attorneys present.
- Judges reminding everyone to breathe and take in the joyous occasion and all of the range of emotions leading up to today.

Commissioner Dorantes noted, "...While we ALL have had challenges pivoting to the virtual environment, my face hurt from smiling so much on Adoption Day 2020!"

In many of the hearings, there was not a dry-eye 'in the house'. From the care and kindness the judges were able to conjure-up over the screen to the side-splitting laughter by the adults who could appreciate the juxtaposition of our collective 2020 angst; there was tremendous appreciation for these moments of happiness and elation at a time when those emotions are few and far between these days.

Chief Court Administrator Patrick L. Carroll III said the day is the culmination of a process in which DCF, the Judicial Branch, private service providers and families join to provide permanency for children. "Many caring and committed professionals - including social work staff, court staff, and community partners -- work in tandem with the families to produce a great outcome for children," Judge Carroll said. "That cooperation is essential to achieve permanency for our children."

"Today was so incredibly moving and a reminder to me about how people like you and all of you at DCF, as well as the attorneys, help to keep our children connected to families who love them. I truly cannot thank you enough," wrote Representative McCarthy Vahey in her correspondence with Department staff after she attended one of the hearings.

The stories that will be told for years to come about 2020, to many of the children who were too young remember how special to their adoption day was.

The Judicial Branch SHOWED UP and created virtual ADOPTION DAY magic!!!  
What a way to start a week of true GRATITUDE...