

A Message from Commissioner Norantes...



Happy holidays to you and your families!

We all celebrate this time of year a little differently. Some may have celebrated Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. Christ's birth is celebrated on Christmas, and Kwanzaa brings us the celebrations of African American life. Three Kings Day (El Día de los Reyes) occurs on the 12th Day of Christmas. The Winter Solstice marks the first day of winter and the shortest day of the year.

2021 is a year we will never forget, whether you have other observances or no formal celebration at all.

We are reminded that children are best supported by families and families are best supported by communities. This year again proved that to be so true. Our families are resilient. They have strengths.

While we all work together to form "the village"- the positive outcomes are endless.

"Home for the Holidays" is the theme for this month's Spotlight on What's Right newsletter.

This year, over 500 children have been safely reunified with their families, and we are approaching 1,000 children being safely reunified during our pandemic response. More than 400 children had their guardianship transferred to kin, and adoptions were finalized for approximately 475 children.

That is over **1,375 children** who are home for the holidays this year!



These numbers do not even consider the thousands of children involved with our Department who were never separated from their parents and remained safely at home due to the

supports offered by the Department and our community partners.

Over 1,375 of our children are home for the holidays this year!

Read our Spotlight to experience how the Baxter family welcomed Amari into their home after they suffered the tragic loss of their own daughter. Proud father Jeffrey Pinckney explains his life's journey to and how his advocacy resulted in him raising his two boys. We also have the powerful story of Lizzy, safely at home with her two daughters, after leaving an abusive relationship.



You now have some homework...

Pause and take time to reflect on your work/life balance. What can you do this year to improve your physical and emotional health?

Reflect back on those lives you have touched and the opportunities you afforded the children and families you serve.

Thank you for all you do each and every day.

I look forward to a fantastic holiday season and New Year!

Commissioner Dorantes





"No one should be scared to live their best life"



Lizzy will be spending the holidays this year with her two daughters. The first time in over three years, safely in her own apartment she now calls home.

Gone are the days of isolation, lack of control over her finances, needing to gain permission to go to the store or to wear particular items of clothing - all

classic signs of the coercive pattern of control present in domestic violence relationships.

Lizzy is a survivor, and she wants to use her voice to help others.

"You feel like trash on the street," Lizzy stated. "I didn't understand myself." Lizzy clearly recalls how her former partner's years of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse impacted her. Even forcing her to send her older daughter to live in with another relative, so she could be shielded from this toxic environment. "I thought it would get better," Lizzy stated.

It is her inner strength, collaboration amongst three agencies and a well-timed call from an unexpected source which dramatically changed her life.

The apartment where Lizzy resided with her partner and young child was in deplorable conditions. An unannounced visit by the landlord found holes in the wall consistent with physical violence. He called the Child Abuse and Neglect Careline, concerned for Lizzy and her daughter. "The landlord saved my life," stated Lizzy.



The landlord expressed his concerns to Lizzy and informed her of the call he made. "You are scared. Feel you will be judged and have no one to talk to," stated Lizzy.

Lizzy anticipated a visit from the Department of Children and Families. "I did not want to lose my kids," Lizzy stated. In fact, she contacted the 24-hour Careline on her own once she knew about the report being made. She advised the Social Worker that she was not safe and was willing to leave the home.

"You feel as if no one will understand," she stated.

The response Lizzy received was the opposite of what she anticipated. "They were there to help," Lizzy stated when referring to DCF Social Workers Melissa Guarneri, Liane Spremullo and Jessica Davis. "I did not feel judged." At one point, Lizzy remembered the Investigator telling her, "I know you are scared, we are not here to remove children. We are here to help."

"I felt drained and looked drained," Lizzy recalls. Intent on stopping the cycle, she embraced those in front of her.

Lizzy trusted the system.

The day of DCF's visit, Lizzy and her daughter left the home and found safety with a relative. They received support from the Center for Family Justice in Bridgeport who assisted Lizzy in filing for a restraining order.

Lizzy spent a period of time at the Domestic Violence Crisis Center in Stamford. She describes the women she met there as a "sisterhood." From their similar stories, long talks, and daily activities, she realized she was not alone in her experiences. "We still check up on each other," Lizzy stated.

Lizzy was then connected to Family and Children's Agency (FCA) Supportive Housing for Families Program. The program combines "housing assistance with intensive strength-based case management." The ultimate goal is for families to secure homes in safe and nurturing neighborhoods while providing their children with a stable and caring home environment.

Lizzy worked with Tiffany McCarthy, Director of Family Support at FCA. "When you work with her you can truly see what resilience looks like and the power of a mother's love for her children. Lizzy took every opportunity that she was given to make positive changes for her and her daughters. She showed such bravery and strength in her journey from abuse



to now as she creates a home for her daughters where they can all feel safe and thrive together.

Lizzy wants her voice to be heard so others know they are not alone and there is hope that there is help available," stated Tiffany.

FCA assisted Lizzy in securing housing, furniture, and other necessities. Lizzy settled in with her young daughter.

The family was not yet complete nor was her work over.



In August, Lizzy's older daughter came back to live with her after they were separated for approximately three years. The family was together again - home for the holidays. "I want my girls to see how strong I am," Lizzy stated. She talks to them, in an age-appropriate manner, about domestic violence. Violence is intergenerational, as Lizzy herself experienced it as a child.

Lizzy is aware that her story will be sent to thousands of people to read. She hopes her voice can be heard by others, so they know they are not alone, the abusive way they are treated is not their fault and supports are available.

"No one should be scared to live their best life."

Note: The name has been changed in this story to protect the identity of the family involved.



"I'm real protective of my kids"

Jeffrey Pinckney was serving breakfast to his 1.5-year-old son, Noah, when he answered the phone. It was time to tell his story.

In between setting the table and quickly stopping his son from running out the door, Jeffrey described his life journey of a difficult childhood, resilience, and support from relatives as well as community providers.



Most of all, Jeffrey's story is about a father determined to care for his own children.

"They need me. They really need me," Jeffrey stated while thinking of the life ahead for Noah and his 6.5-year-old son, Joshua, who has complex needs. "I hope they don't fail," he added, while stressing he wants his children to have the best education. "A big challenge," is the way he describes parenting.



Parenting Jeffrey when he was a child was no easy task. With his father incarcerated and Jeffrey living with a single mother in Hartford, he started down the path towards juvenile delinquency. "I was a follower and not a leader," he stated. At 14 years of age came the car thefts, missing school and not listening to his mother.

"My father taught me to be a good man."

"My father changed me around," Jeffrey was clear to emphasize. Upon his release from prison, Jeffrey's father came to get him and moved him to New York. The cycle of violence and crime needed to be broken

The father and son team grew in their relationship. "My father taught me to be a good man," Jeffrey stated.

Jeffrey began reaching his potential. Going to high school each day, staying out of trouble, and excelling in sports. He was fortunate to have a father come into his life at the right time. This is unlike many adolescent boys in the inner cities that Jeffrey sees each day. "They need fathers in their lives," Jeffrey stated.

Jeffrey's path to fatherhood started shortly after he completed high school. He gave up a full scholarship to play running back at Syracuse after his first child was born. He was eventually married and had two additional children. They are grown now and with great pride he described how his oldest children are hard working. "They are here for me," he stated.

Life then took a couple of negative turns. In 2015, Joshua was born and unknown to Jeffrey, was living in very serious conditions. Incarcerated at the time, Jeffrey found out through a relative that Joshua was placed in foster care. "I've got your son," a woman called and said to him one day. "What about me and my family?" Jeffrey would ask himself. He did not understand why he was not allowed to have a voice or be part of the planning process.

Jeffrey described his interactions with the Department and service providers during that time as reflective of judgements made against fathers, especially those who had experienced a troubled past. "I'm his dad," Jeffrey would tell others

when talking about Joshua. If asked, he would have presented his own mother as a resource.

Joshua was eventually reunified with his mother. Years later, Jeffrey received a call at work. "I hope everything is okay," he remembered thinking. Joshua again came to the attention of the Department. "I'm taking him," Jeffrey said to himself. Now, Jeffrey engaged with Social Workers, and actively took part in meetings and expressed his desires to the Department. It was determined Jeffrey would now raise Joshua - preventing him from entering foster care.

He did not understand why he was not allowed to have a voice or be part of the planning process.



Three months later, Jeffrey's phone rang again. He was surprised to learn that his friend gave birth to a child named Noah. Jeffrey had already been working with the Department and the supports they provided as he cared for Joshua. Given the family circumstances, it was determined that Jeffrey should take Noah home directly from the hospital.

A single father with two little boys.

Jeffrey accepted community-based services. He engaged with Norman Goldstein, Family Support Specialist, from Catholic Charities. He realized that no father is perfect and was assisted in navigating the delicate balance of protecting his boys while ensuring they had a relationship with their mothers. He was always open to feedback. "The classes soothed you," he later stated. In particular, he enjoyed the father groups.

Jeffrey spoke so highly of his DCF Social Worker, Amanda Beane. "I love Amanda. She gives me the credit I really need." As their relationship grew, he gained confidence. "She gave me the will power I needed."

"Amanda is a good person, down to earth."

Jeffrey was also referred to Christina Avino, Parent





Educator with Parenting Support Services from Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center. "They get into stuff," Jeffrey related. He enjoyed using videos to increase his skills and quickly realized he wanted to pay forward what he learned to others who are in a similar situation. Jeffrey began volunteering at a food banks and clothing closets for the disenfranchised.

Both his abilities and confidence grew as a father. What message does Jeffrey have for other fathers who are involved with the Department? "It's never over," he would tell them while encouraging other fathers to feel empowered and speak up.

Jeffrey stated he felt blessed on Thanksgiving to have his boys and extended family with him. Norman even stopped by. Christmas will be equally as special.

Jeffrey quit his job at the United Parcel Service to be a full-time father to his boys. He lives with his mother, who is his main support.

Jeffrey recognizes parenting brings with it new challenges each day, but he his is ready. "I'm real protective of my kids."

A Story of Profound Joy After Tragedy

Emily and Don Baxter experienced an unimaginable loss--that of their infant daughter Amaryis, who died at home when she was only five days old.

Emily, a schoolteacher, and Don, a pediatric nurse, are parents of three boys, ages 20, 13 and 11 years. They mourned their loss deeply and learned so much about grief and healing. "Soon after we lost our baby, we adopted kittens and chickens, we wanted our boys to feel and see the beauty of new life. That's what the animals did for them, and for us," Emily stated.

Emily and Don found a depth of love and personal healing through the selfless act of fostering.



After the painful, one-year anniversary of Amaryis's death, they found themselves enrolled in a training course learning about foster care and adoption. A "Weekend for A Lifetime" family, Emily and Don participated in an intensive, weekend long training at the Omni Hotel in New Haven.

"It was always our life goal to do this, to foster and adopt," explained Emily. "It wasn't necessarily to fill that hold of loss for us. The timing felt right." Three days after being licensed to foster, the couple began caring for an infant boy with other children being placed with them on a short-term basis.



A year later, the Baxter's received a call to care for a baby girl named, Amari. "Her name was so close to our daughter's name," Emily explained. "It felt like she was meant for us."

Amari was just six days old and needed placement upon discharge from the hospital. The Baxters, who are deeply rooted in their faith, talked to their sons about the baby girl.

Emily recalls her son, Asher, saying emphatically, "We have to take her, then people will really know that God is good!"

There was no doubt that the Baxters saw this call to service as a blessing of divine intervention. Their foster son was visiting with his mom and preparing to transition home. The anticipation of this loss was heavy on Emily's heart, given all that her and her family had endured with the loss of their baby. Yet, Amari's need for permanency balanced that sadness.

For the past 18 months, the Baxter boys have thoroughly savored being big brothers to both their foster brother and, to their foster sister, Amari. They spoke of how wonderful it feels to hear the babies learn how to say their names.

Randy Brown, a DCF worker who spoke on behalf of the Baxters. "How awesome and excited Caleb and Asher are to be big brothers to Amari. It's a truly special family."

On Tuesday, November 30th, Emily and Don, along with their children, adopted Amari. In a virtual courtroom setting, the Baxter's, all dressed in matching tee-shirts, shared the moment with extended family, joyfully celebrating this beautiful baby girl.



Although their journey to healing is far from over, Amari came at a time when they needed her most.