

May 2021

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



A Message From Commissioner Dorantes...

Reimagining the Foster Care System



On the calendar of observances ...May is a busy month!

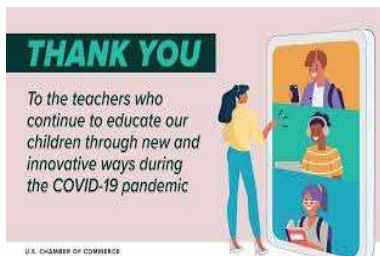
Nationally, we celebrate Foster Care Month in May. It is beyond a shadow of a doubt that Connecticut has THE BEST FOSTER PARENTS in the country. Whether they are core or kin resource families -- or providing extra therapeutic or medically complexed care -- **all** have deep heart-pockets of love for the children in their homes. Our foster parents have embraced children, engaged with their birth families and play a vital role on the team working towards the ultimate goal of reunification. The CT Association of Foster and Adoptive Families recently held their second *virtual* conference highlighting the special qualities of Connecticut's foster families. <https://cafafct.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CAFAF-May-2021-2dn-video.mp4>

In this edition of the "*Spotlight on What's Right*", DCF Director of Foster Care will introduce the **Quality Parenting Initiative**. Simply put, it is a more natural and effective means to work together on behalf of children. **QPI** is the model that reimagines the relationships between the Department, foster/adoptive parents, and birth families. Please listen as foster **Rebecca Allen** talks about her experiences as a CT foster parent. She embodies the **QPI** principles: https://www.wfsb.com/news/ct-21-celebrating-foster-moms/article_3fea7c50-b007-11eb-9f44-777c2401b126.html



Among the over 8,000 CT residents whose lives were claimed by covid19, there were at least three Connecticut foster parents. We will forever remember the impact on children's lives and the care provided by **Stephanie Lee, Richard Phillips and Roberta Outlaw**. We stand with their families and share their loss.

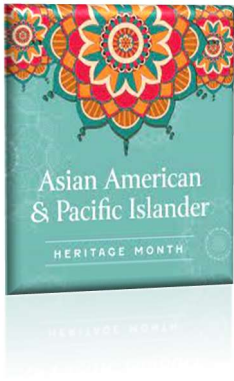
May is also a time to celebrate our Nurses. This year especially, DCF Nurses in the Regional and Central Offices as well as in the Solnit facilities, are the Healthcare HEROES among us. Where would we be without you?! Your compassion, care and expertise have brought us all through a moment in history that we won't soon forget. THANK YOU



Appreciation is also extended to our Education Professional during the month of May!

Your strength during this time ensures children are educated, inspired and enriched. Such tremendous work you all have done during the pandemic.

Did you know under the U.S. Census Bureau, that term, "Asian Pacific Islander" evolved in the 1980's and 1990's? Finally, in 1997, the White House Office of Management and Budget broke the terms, "Asian" and "Pacific Islander" into two separate racial categories.



DCF is proud of the rich diversity of our workforce.

This Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month affords us the opportunity to "Spotlight" members of our incredible staff. Get a tissue ready as you read the harrowing account of one of our own. In the description of his boyhood journey to the US, there are many lessons shared by DCF Danbury Program Supervisor **Trung Le**. He candidly shares some memories of his Vietnamese life experiences. Thank you Trung for helping us understand *survival* in its purest form.

Recently, there have been a marked increase in anti-Asian hate crimes. These acts are disturbing and intolerable. DCF continues to operate in the context of a Safe & Sound culture of mutual respect and inclusiveness. Learning more about our unique stories and experiences draws us closer to each other and makes us all more appropriately responsive public servants.

May the month of Mental Health Awareness usher us into the unofficial start to summer. This year, as we emerge from quarantine hibernation, let us use this time to refresh, renew and refocus in the getting back to the steadiness of our business. We have worked tremendously hard to protect CT's children, support CT's families and in staying connected to CT communities.

We are getting through this ... TOGETHER.

“Being in Foster Care Has Been A Privilege”



“It all happened in a way that brought me to where I am today. I am no longer lost,” explained Rayssa when sharing the details of her life's journey. Born in Brazil, Rayssa moved to Connecticut with her mother, stepfather and her sister when she was six years old. “My mom had a friend who was selling her house, so she brought us to the United States because it was a really good opportunity for my family,” she said. Despite her mom’s desire to provide a better life for her daughters, it was not possible for the girls to remain safely at home. Rayssa and her sister were placed into foster care. Although Rayssa will not return home, she shares a close relationship with her mother and her sister. When speaking of her biological father in Brazil, Rayssa explains “He doesn’t really know me anymore, he just knows me as my 6-year-old self. We never stayed connected when I moved to the US and it’s really okay.”

“When I came to the US, I didn’t know how to speak or write in English. I taught myself by listening and practicing,” she proudly explained. Rayssa is now fluent in Spanish, English and Portuguese. Although she loved school growing up, she had some difficulties in her early adolescent years. “I changed foster homes and schools often and lived in a group home. I was struggling. I am very grateful for all my foster homes; I struggled socially and had a lot of anxiety. I made it really hard on everyone. I am not mad for needing to leave those places, I am grateful,” she said.



For the past fourteen months, Rayssa has lived with Shana and Rob Heon, therapeutic foster parents through Waterford Country School. They have been fostering for the past twenty-one years. “I’m really grateful for them,” Rayssa said. “I don’t tell them enough how grateful I really am, I think it’s because I am scared. They never gave up on me when they could have,” Rayssa said with tears in her eyes.

Shana, Rayssa foster mom, is very proud of her. “Rayssa is a happy young lady with a lot of dreams and goals. She is very independent and does not hesitate to make decisions that fit her needs, she is also not afraid to ask for assistance when she identifies a need. She is a very young high school senior with so many possibilities ahead of her,” she said.

When asked about her social worker, Rayssa lit up and smiled. "She actually cares about me," Rayssa said. Gina Cluff, a social worker from the Willimantic Office, mirrors that same admiration for Rayssa. Rayssa was nominated by Ms. Cluff to be highlighted as an exceptional youth. "She has shown to be a mature, determined individual," stated Ms. Cluff. "Rayssa has the kind of perseverance and drive that despite all of the challenges she has faced over her young life, always shines through. She is resilient and engaging and can admit, even if it may take some processing first, that, at times, she could improve in certain areas. It has been a breath of fresh air at how accepting Rayssa has been to new ideas, supports and services, regardless if it may present as a challenge for her. Rayssa has overcome many barriers but, all the while, has been able to maintain a positive attitude throughout the obstacles she has faced. Rayssa has come a long way and will undoubtedly continue to improve and succeed. I look forward to watching her grow into the wonderful young adult that she is becoming and seeing what her future holds."



Rayssa was extremely humbled when asked to talk about her successes, repeatedly expressing her gratitude for all that she has. Rayssa is now a straight 'A' Student, plays tennis and volleyball and is a member of the Department's Youth Advisory Board (YAB). She attends therapeutic services through CHR and, is actively involved with Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) - EastConn, a program that provides financial incentives for youth to complete their schoolwork and develop learning skills. According to Connie Sipos, Rayssa's supervisor at OPP, this past year was a difficult time for everyone because of COVID-19 restrictions resulting in learning together and pivoting to create a successful experience. "Rayssa stuck with the program and was very successful. She then took the initiative to join our year-round program, 'COOL Directions'. I like the fact that she is able to advocate for herself and put herself in a position to be successful. I have also witnessed her be a cheerleader for her foster sister. She is helpful and loving. Rayssa is a kind, smart and hardworking individual," Connie added.



On June 11th, Rayssa, who is just 16 years old, will proudly graduate early from Killingly High School and hopes to transition into young adulthood while pursuing a career as an Ultrasound Technician. "I'm bringing my foster parents, my sister and my mom to graduation. Mr. and Mrs. Heon are my family," she explained.

"Every single thing that happened has brought me to this good place. Being in foster care has been a privilege for me."

The Story of Trung Le

"Sometimes you don't realize the strength you have..."



We know Trung Le as a Program Supervisor in the Danbury Office. What few understand is that at 16 years of age, he escaped Vietnam. Taking a boat with 73 other people across the South China Sea. He went four days and four nights without food while drinking water from a bucket used for boat fuel.

His story is one of resilience and strength. Trung uses his life story in the everyday work he does with the Department and to improve the lives of others.

Trung was born during the Vietnam War, living most of his life with his grandmother and four younger sisters. After the United States military withdrew from the country, the North Vietnamese took over South Vietnam putting Trung's family at-risk given his parents worked for the United States government.

As a result, his father was placed into a concentration camp. Trung, a little boy at aged 9, would travel by bus over a two-day period to visit his father in prison. He would bring his father food, sugar and salt so he could survive his conditions. For three years, it was Trung, sleeping in bus stations and carrying heavy groceries to support his father.

As an adolescent, Trung's family made the decision that it was best for him to leave the country. Given he was the only boy, this would lead to him safely continuing the family's legacy. On 12 occasions, Trung attempted to leave Vietnam. When spotted by the military, he would be chased into the jungle, shot at, and had to run barefoot over sharp thorns to avoid being captured. Twice he was caught and was forced to spend three days and then an entire month in prison.

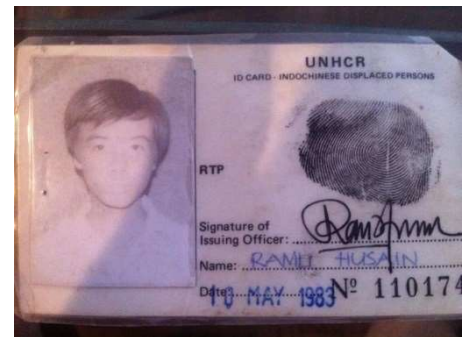


On the 13th try, Trung successfully boarded a boat to Malaysia and arrived days later. He then spent over a year in the Pulau Bidong refugee camp after being classified as a "boat person."

Trung still has his identification card from that refugee camp - showing the young face of a brave young man. Given his unaccompanied minor status, Trung was eventually placed in Syracuse New York with a "foster family" when he was 18 years of age.

His first placement was not a good match and Trung left. Trung speaks openly of being in "survival mode" as he was in a new country, without his family and no friends. "Sometimes you don't realize the strength you have until you are dealing with a crisis," Trung stated.

Trung moved into his own apartment, went to school full-time, was on the soccer team and worked at Ames Department store as a stock boy. At the time, Trung spoke broken English yet learned the language and finished high school in three years.



While at Ames, he met Theresa Fraser who assisted him with speaking, taught him how to respond to customers, they discussed school and overall life issues. "She was like a mother to me," Trung stated. An offer was made to have Trung live with her family - Trung "found home." Kinship.

Trung had offers from other families who understood his story. He realized the Frasers were the best family for him. "They respected me," Trung stated. "They accepted me the way I was. They were my safety net and security." They took him in without any reimbursement or financial incentives.

"They are my family," according to Trung. "They are my parents."

Jack Fraser quickly became Trung's father figure. "Jack is wonderful and a father everyone would wish to have," Trung emphatically stated. He tells the story of Jack driving 6-8 hours from one end of New York to the other to pick him up for college breaks and drive him home.

For the past 27 years, Trung has worked for the Department of Children and Families. He imparts what he has learned on his journey to his staff with the goal to assist them in looking holistically at families. He relates his experiences to those children and families we serve. "There primary concern is how to survive. How to eat today," according to Trung. "We must remember that."

Especially with undocumented persons, Trung understands their focus is on survival and not necessary engaging in services until they know their core needs are going to be met.

As an adolescent, Trung described his thoughts of needing to be "three steps ahead" and thinking through what has to occur next so he was taken care of - planning for survival. He imparts this knowledge to his adolescent social workers, using the example of youth needing to know where they will live when school ends, when they will receive a stipend and getting out in front of questions they may have.

Just like the Frasers empowered him, Trung wants his employees to allow our youth to say, "This is where I want to be."

In 2005, Trung went back to Vietnam for the first time. He went unannounced. That brave 16-year-old who left was now a grown man - a husband, father, friend and inspiration.

Although Theresa has died, Jack remains a vital part of Trungs' life. They vacation at least once each year and maintain phone contact. A true example of permanency.

What would Trung's overall message be about his life that he wants others to know? "Sometimes you don't realize the strength you have until you are dealing with a crisis."

Foster Care Director Natalia Liriano Discusses the Quality Parenting Initiative

"Foster care should be about restoration"



The relationship a child has with his or her parents is critical to their wellbeing and emotional health. When separation results in a child entering care, the impact on a child can be detrimental if the emphasis of the system is not on upholding, nurturing, and strengthening the parent-child relationship and connection.

Relationships and supporting families and communities are the fundamental concepts that lie behind the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) "Quality Parenting Initiative" (QPI). QPI is a program of the Youth Law Center and now, DCF is one of the National QPI sites which includes 75 jurisdictions in 8 states.

DCF QPI is spearheaded by Natalia Liriano, the agency's new Statewide Director of Foster Care.

Why QPI? Historically, the unintended consequence of the child welfare system and its policies was the retraumatizing of disenfranchised children, families, and their communities. Today, child development experts, social justice advocates, and the voices of youth, parents, caregivers, and community partners made a call to action - a call to dismantle the old system and do better.

QPI, the approach, lifts and leads the transformation of child welfare, child protection and foster care systems. Its focus is on building relationships where the child's well-being -holistic well-being - is at the center and the basis for policy and practice.

"When a child enters foster care, the child may not understand the cause of the separation or have language to articulate emotions or reasons. When a child enters foster care, their parents not only deal with the circumstances leading to the separation, addiction and or mental health, but also the fear of not knowing if their child is safe and the idea of being replaced as a parent, permanently. So, it is so important that licensed caregivers understand the dynamics of separation and serve as a bridge between the child and the parent," Ms. Liriano said. Research shows the importance of the parent-child relationship and what the trauma of separation does to a child.



DCF Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes recently spoke about QPI. "We must do everything possible to maintain children safely within their own home. But if safety reasons require that the child be placed, then maintaining the relationship between child and parent is vital for the child's wellbeing," said Commissioner Dorantes. "QPI will reinforce the bonds

between the parents and child and reinforce the importance of the foster parent and birth parent forming a relationship at this critical point in time when the child has just experienced the trauma of separation," she said.

"QPI will reduce internal conflicts experienced by the child upon entering care. By showing the child that the foster parent, the biological parent, and the Department are all working together, the child will feel more comfortable. The child realizes

it's okay to love my mother even if she can't care for him or her," stated DCF Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams. "Mommas love their children, and children love their mothers."

Under QPI, the parent who has been separated from their child will no longer be prevented from playing an active role in that child's life. "Parents need to know their role as parent is not sidelined and that their child is in good hands. If the department can create that environment, the parent is able to focus on their well-being and addressing the underlying reason for the needed separation," stated Deputy Commissioner Williams.

"If I know my child is safe, then I can get the help I need," Ms. Liriano said. "By taking this inclusive approach, parents and licensed caregivers will experience respect, have clear expectations, and know they are part of a team. They engage in shared parenting and in the development of practice and systems improvement."

She said, "One concrete change underway is implementation of "comfort calls," where a licensed caregiver calls the parent within 24 hours, if not sooner after placement, to assure them that their child is safe." After this Ms. Liriano described a face to face visit (or virtual) occurs called an "ice breaker." The icebreaker is the beginning of shared parenting between the parent and licensed caregiver. The purpose is to reduce parent's anxiety, increase licensed caregiver understanding of the child, exchange information, schedules and to answer questions and breakdown perceived or real barriers to the relationship being formed.

Ms. Liriano stated some foster parents are already embracing the approach. "We already have licensed caregivers sending texts and pictures and making sure the parents are involved daily with their child," she said. An example of shared parenting could include inviting the parents to the home to spend time with the child in their environment or extending an invite to an organized family event such as birthday parties or dinner. It is the expectation these activities would be reciprocated after the child is reunified, whereby expanding the child's village of support.

Rebecca Allen, a licensed caregiver, shared her experience of shared parenting on WFSB Channel 3 who was highlighting National Foster Care Month. Ms. Allen shared how partnering with a mother and experiencing the reunification of child and mother was the ultimate reward. "Partnering with the biological parents is my favorite part," she said. It is so important, Ms. Allen added, that parents know "that I am the number one person on their team fighting to get their child back to them."

"We're not looking for caregivers to replace mom and dad," Ms. Liriano said. "It's about covering and supporting them. Foster care should be about restoration."



Ms. Liriano said efforts are underway to permeate QPI throughout the child welfare system, not just child protection. So far, the QPI approach has been messaged with community stakeholders, parent and child attorneys, contracted providers, and administrative DCF staff. Each region established a local QPI Steering Committee with representatives from all areas of the department including licensed caregivers.

The department has 30 QPI champions who participated in an eight session QPI Champion Development series and are members of the national QPI peer network. They are charged with leading task groups, recruiting allies, and keeping the QPI message alive. QPI champions are active participants on the CT Caregiver Practice Model, Statewide Kinship Onboarding Curriculum Development Teams and recently, participating in drafting a federal grant proposal.