



Happy holidays to you and your families during this special time of the year!

Hanukah is the Festival of Lights while Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ. African American life is honored during Kwanzaa and Three Kings Day (El Dia de los Reyes) occurs on the 12th day of Christmas. The Winter Solstice marks the first day of winter and is also the shortest day of the year.

Our celebrations reflect the diversity in all of us while we share one common theme - supporting one another.

2022 was again memorable for many reasons. You are resilient, our families are stronger because of our efforts and thousands of children across Connecticut are better off because of our work - and living safely at home.

Our safety practice this year has evolved and must remain in the forefront of each decision we make along with our community partners. The focus on child safety will continue in the new year as we enhance our practice and embrace the challenges ahead!

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

We have achieved permanency for over 1,150 children this year who are home for the holidays - including more than 440 adoptions and over 300 transfers of guardianship.



Our collective efforts have resulted in over 400 children being safely reunified!

It has been featured by many media outlets including with Scott Haney and the "Great Day" at 9:00 a.m. team at WFSB. See the interview here: [Great Day](#)



A year ago, Deborah Franklin's twins were removed. Read about her journey to overcome years of intergenerational trauma, domestic violence and substance abuse. "I walked out of Hell barefoot", she stated. The smiles of the faces of Allisa and Ava tell us all what reunification is all about! Listen as Deborah tells parts of her courageous story: [FOX 61](#)

"I have a strong determination and will power. I wanted my daughters in my care," stated John Little. Leilani and Zyanna are now home with their father. It was not an easy road, but one John so eagerly was willing to tell. Read his story and look for the pictures of the beautifully painted walls which awaited these little girls when they walked through the doors.

The permanency numbers do not even consider the thousands of children who were able to remain safely at home and were never separated from their parents. The collective efforts of DCF and our community partners made this possible!



One such support for our families is the Olive Branch Toy Shop - the vision of Jackie Ford in the Office of Community Relations. It was developed with the unique approach to have families come to the Olive Branch and pick out items themselves - for their own children - empowering and respecting their role as parents. Each family has the opportunity to "shop" for free, picking gifts that they know their children will enjoy. It is open by appointment to families who have open DCF cases. Watch

one story here: [Olive Branch](#)

Please take some time this holiday season to rest, relax and reflect back on all of your accomplishments!

I truly appreciate each and every one of your efforts!

Happy Holidays!

"I walked out of Hell barefoot"



"Pile of crumbs." That is how Deborah Franklin described her life a little over a year ago.

Alcohol and drugs occupied every moment as she lived with a coercive and abusive partner. Deborah lost her job, had her car re-possessed and suffered "loss after loss."

"I knew I was sick."

Deborah's 18 and 11 year old sons went to live with their fathers and her 2.5 year old twins, Allison and Ava, were placed into foster care.

That was still not rock bottom.

For the next five months, Deborah's life spiraled downward and she fell deeper into her addiction. "I was out of control," Deborah stated. "So painful. I was so ashamed I did not want to make eye contact with anyone."

"I knew I wanted to fight. It was just a matter of when."

It was one day in April, sitting by herself in her apartment, that Deborah cried while looking at pictures of her children. "I sat with myself and just prayed," she stated. It was time to enter a rehabilitation facility. She Googled "women and children's programs" and found a program in Waterbury.

"I walked out of Hell barefoot."

"I literally crawled into rehab," is how Deborah describes that decision. For almost three months, she attended the program, worked to understand the negative relationships around her, and grew in strength. A major part of that work was to heal from her own childhood trauma.



Deborah herself was placed into foster care as a child. "Abuse was normal in my birth family," she stated. It was Deborah, as a young child, who broke the silence to keep herself safe. Her mother did not fight to protect her. "I am everything she is not," is how Deborah describes her.

A commitment to becoming sober was also a statement to "right those generational curses" and address the "fight or flight" coping mechanisms she learned in order to survive.



"The best gift I can give to my children is to heal," she stated. "I just want people to know it is never too late."

During this time, two very special DCF Social Workers supported her along the way.

"I love my DCF team," Deborah commented. She describes Lillian Julien and Solsiree Vega as "transparent from the beginning" while being "supporting, understanding and caring."

It was Lillian whom Deborah first met. "We just clicked," is how she describes their relationship. It was her "calming voice and non-judgmental" attitude which aided in the relationship.

Deborah tells the story of Sol, bringing her furniture, including a couch and dresser, after-hours to make sure her apartment was furnished.

After almost three months, Deborah was discharged from the program. It was Alcoholics Anonymous meetings twice a day, EMDR therapy and maintaining employment which were the next steps.

Deborah credits the work of Child and Family Agency IPV-FAIR program with helping her understand the dynamics in her previous abusive relationship.

It was the Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time (RTFT) program that also assisted her in reunifying with her daughters - assisting in the "smooth transition" from weekly visits, unsupervised, overnights and now support in the early stages of the twins being home.



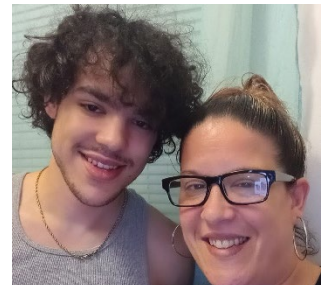
"My children deserve healthy, productive, clean and sober parents," Deborah stated.

Allison and Ava were reunified a few weeks before Christmas. They are home for the holidays!

What does Deborah want them to know, when they are old enough to understand their history? "Mommy is human," Deborah stated.

Deborah is telling her story and many are listening." She was interviewed on Fox 61 news and by Hearst media. She recently told her journey to Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes and Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz. "I feel kinda weird getting all this attention," Deborah stated as she believes she is "doing what any mother would."

Allison and Ava have adjusted well to returning back home. She is grateful for the care they received in foster care and even wrote the foster parent a three page letter asking her to remain a part of the girls life. Her boys are "super happy they got their mom back."



What is her message for other parents in a similar situation? "It's truly up to you and not DCF," Deborah stated. She is adamant that the parent controls the outcome - not DCF.

As her days are now filled with getting the girls to their school programs and working on her recovery,



Deborah remains close to Lillian and Sol. "We have a group chat," Deborah explained. "Hello or good morning my beautiful DCF workers" is how Deborah begins the almost daily texts.

"I will be sad when the case closes."

The DCF staff call her "mama bear."

Deborah's strength is immeasurable.

"I'm living proof you can rise up against the bad."

"I wanted my daughters in my care"



Robert Little is in the holiday spirit. He has a Christmas tree, the list of presents has been filled, murals are painted on the walls of the once vacant bedrooms for his little girls, Leilani and Zyanna, and the sounds of their little feet running around the apartment can be heard.

The sisters are now home for the holidays.

"They are putting me in the holiday spirit," Robert stated. "This is a Christmas present to me, maybe even more to them."

This reunification journey spanned over 1,000 days, and included the impact of COVID-19, court delays, family centered services and fatherhood engagement. It speaks volumes to the power of the human spirit, resiliency of two sisters and a team who supported a father who never gave up.

Robert was in the process of moving to Florida when he learned his young girls were living in an unsafe environment and were placed into DCF custody. "I came back to Connecticut, sold everything and lived with my mom," he stated. "I wanted my daughters in my care."

Visitation began and then the global pandemic hit impacting all facets of the Department's case practice and services in the provider community. Visitation between Robert and his daughters transitioned to virtual but could only last 20-30 minutes given their very young age and short attention spans.



During this time, Leilani was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor behind her ear and Robert was only able to attend a few hospital treatments given the pandemic restrictions. "She was resilient the whole time," Robert stated when describing how his young daughter endured this difficult period in her life.



Robert began renting a three-bedroom apartment in anticipation the girls would be returned to him. He recalls sitting by himself, wondering when his girls would come home only to be told the permanency plan was moving toward termination of parental rights and adoption. "I felt DCF dropped the ball," he stated.

"I gave up hope about two or three times for less than 24 hours. I would wake up the next day with a changed mindset," Robert remembers. "I have strong determination and will power."

The trajectory of the case then changed. "The last two workers I had did a phenomenal job," Robert stated. Those workers - Lori Green and Daijah Mumin - are credited by him for their compassionate ways and "trying to make it work."

Robert engaged with the Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES) through the Village for Children and Families in Hartford. "They were directly in my corner," is how he describes his experiences.

He was referred to the Reunification and Therapeutic Family Time (RTFT) program also with the Village to assist in the reunification process and transition of the girls back home.

Reunification was now a reality. "I became overjoyed when things started swinging my way," Robert stated.



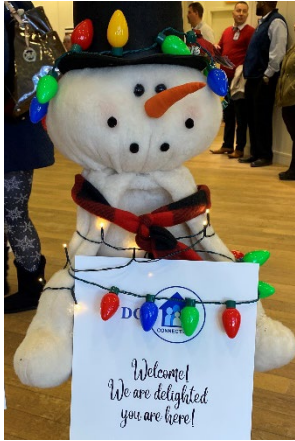
What did he think when the girls finally came home? "I have been sitting in this three-bedroom apartment by myself waiting for this moment," was his response. But this is no ordinary place to live. Robert is an artist and the girls' bedroom walls have murals painted on them, set up like a castle with hills and mountains. Clouds are painted on the ceiling with lace hanging from a light fixture.

Leilani and Zyanna are loved. Robert wants to give them the opportunity to "reach their dreams."

"Don't give up. I stayed there diligently," is the advice Robert would give to other parents, especially men, in a similar situation as him. "Stay focused and stay strong."

"There is light at the end of the tunnel. That light may seem like 100,000 miles away but stay steady."

“I walked through the doors feeling ashamed to have an open DCF case & walked out feeling so thankful that I do.”



After a telephone call to the executive management office, Shops at Somerset Square, DCF found themselves with an amazing opportunity to host a holiday toy event for the families they serve in a vacant store.

Working quickly to fill the donated store space with toys and launch within nine days, the Olive Branch was born.

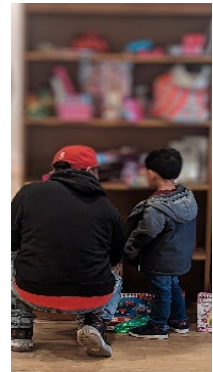
The concept was developed after receiving countless emails and calls from Connecticut residents who wished to donate new toys, bikes, and gifts to children involved with DCF. “I imagined a centralized hub where all holiday donations could be gathered and sorted for families to “shop” for free, alleviating a burden and helping our families to feel empowered and self-sufficient,” explained Jacqueline Ford who had the vision to launch this pop-up shop.

Located in Glastonbury, Ct, The Olive Branch is marking its second year. Open by appointment for families whose children are at home and receiving services, it started as a holiday shop but has now expanded to help families with other celebratory events, such as birthdays, religious milestones, quinceaneras, prom, and graduations.



Rooted in a desire to help families who are receiving services from the department by extending a hand to offer goodwill, and peacebuilding, the *olive branch* felt like the perfect symbol to use, according to Ford, who is the Community Outreach Coordinator for DCF. “We are often perceived as powerful and authoritative

and our work in the child welfare system can be frightening for families. To have this opportunity to extend homage to our families is a true privilege,” she says and is only possible because of an army of dedicated people who helped to fill the space with goods and, their time.



“DCF made it possible for my children to have a Christmas, I can’t thank you all enough,” shared mother of four, Ashley May Williams who added that one day she will give back because of the dept of her gratitude this year.

One of the major themes that Ford has observed while working with parents and families at the Olive Branch is the relief, they feel at being able to shop for their children, gift wrap those items, and leave the store knowing that they had a hand in creating joy for their children. This year, each child received between two and three gifts, as well as a playground ball, a stuffed animal, and a backpack (filled with toiletries).

Each family was also offered a freshly cut Christmas tree and a family game. This holiday season some families traveled well over an hour to shop for their children and nearly two hundred families were served.

One mom followed up in an email after her shopping appointment, “Thank you for today! I cried all the way home; this has made my kids’ Christmas! I can’t wait to see the look on their faces on Christmas morning.”

Each parent shopper was referred to the Olive Branch by their DCF Social Worker. Ford has witnessed firsthand parents who cautiously walk through the front doors, not knowing what to expect but because they are greeted warmly, with kindness, and with no judgment, they enjoy the experience. They choose each gift with great intention and carefully gift-wrapped their items.



Community volunteers mingle with our families, carry on everyday conversations, serve cups of coffee, and helped gift-wrap with no mention of their open DCF cases unless the parent wished to share. Some parents cry happy tears and leave the experience with hugs and gratitude. She’s thrilled, Ford adds, to see how the store has grown. Donations were made by community residents, civic groups, corporations such as Walmart, and three businesses that held large toy drives for The Olive Branch.

“I walked through the doors feeling ashamed to have an open DCF case and walked out feeling so thankful that I do,” explained another mom, holding a newly cut Christmas tree in one hand and a bag of wrapped Christmas gifts in her other. This mother of six children expressed gratitude for the opportunity to shop at Christmastime for her children, “I feel abundantly blessed, “Merry Christmas to all”, she said, holding back tears.

The store provided more than just a shopping experience. Parents joined together with other parents in fellowship and in one instance, a mother’s candid sharing about her struggles with the special education system in her son’s school connected her with an Olive Branch volunteer who is an attorney. The two spoke and the attorney offered her pro bono legal services to help navigate a difficult system. Through tears, the mother commented, “I have no words. I came for a few toys and now I feel even more relieved!”.



The Olive Branch will be open for donations year-round. If interested in donating, or, if there is a family receiving in-home services and needs a gift for an upcoming occasion, please email jacqueline.ford@ct.gov.

