

"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."