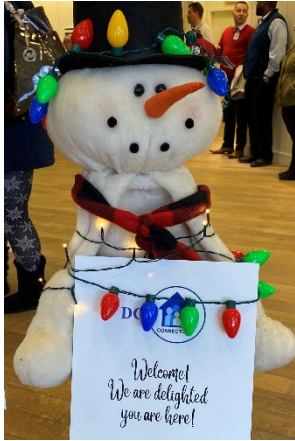


“I walked through the doors feeling ashamed to have an open DCF case & walked out feeling so thankful that I do.”



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.

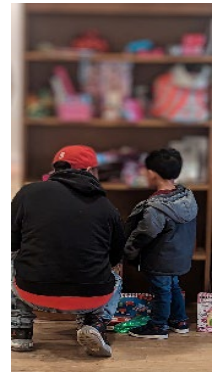
The concept was developed after receiving countless emails and calls from Connecticut residents who wished to donate new toys, bikes, and gifts to children involved with DCF. “I imagined a centralized hub where all holiday donations could be gathered and sorted for families to “shop” for free, alleviating 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.

