

Department of Children and Families
SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT



A Message from Commissioner Norantes...

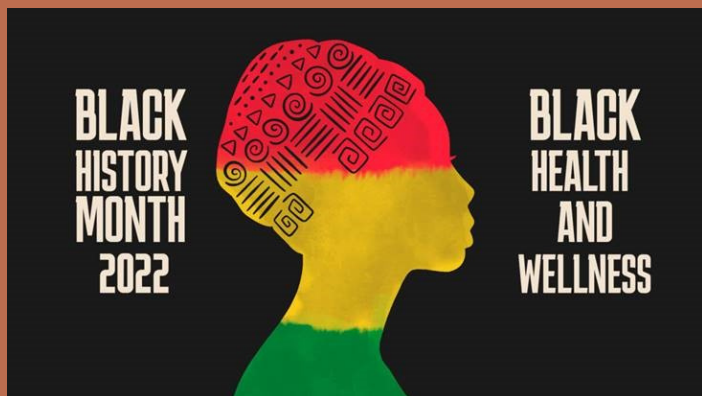
February is Black History Month. "For each child that's born, the morning star rises and sings to the universe who we are." Fitting words sang today as we celebrated and exchanged **information** and **inspiration** at the Central Office Black History month event - honoring the contribution and legacy of African Americans across United States history.



"Black Health and Wellness" is the theme for 2022, which places focus again on the importance of physical, mental, and spiritual health for each of us.

DCF remains committed to addressing disproportionate outcomes and eliminating disparity experienced by those we serve. As we strive to become a racially just organization, we will continue implementing leadership strategies - which hold all of us accountable.

Senate Bill 1 was passed last legislative session declaring *Racism a Public Health Crisis* in our state. Governor Lamont established a *Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health*. With great pride, I represent the work of this Department by being appointed to this body and highlight DCF's Racial Justice efforts.



Please read our [Racial Justice Data, Activities and Strategies](#) report recently submitted to the Connecticut legislature. Thank you to **Monica Rams**, Director, Office of Multicultural Affairs/Office of Diversity and Equity for compiling the great work occurring across DCF office, divisions and facilities!



The Department recently launched a targeted enhancement of our Faith-Based Initiative. 30 Pastors throughout Connecticut have made the commitment to work side by side with the Department to recruit foster parents within the **Queen Esther** foster care recruitment project. Along with that effort, the "**Hands Off**" campaign is the second strategy in this collaboration. This targeted partnership with predominantly Black church leaders, who already support the needs of their communities, is anchored by a PSA addressing the taboo topics of physical, sexual, and intimate partner violence within the Black community.

These credible messengers can also serve as linkages to resources to address historic racial trauma. In addition, DCF is crafting a consultation hub model using the **Urban Trauma Framework**. This clinical approach provides training and support to providers regarding the deleterious effects of racial trauma on children and youth of color across Connecticut's urban areas.



Congratulations to DCF Torrington Social Work Supervisor **Anthony Gay** for being awarded the 2022 *Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award* for his commitment to serving our children and families. Along with his impassioned Fatherhood work, SWS Gay has dedicated attention to supporting, convening and amplifying the voices of Black men.

The Department also posthumously awarded Bridgeport DCF FASU Social Worker **Mary Brantley** this award and we were honored her family took part in the ceremony. Mary passed away last year after a 32-year career with the Department and was an incredibly active public servant. She is terribly missed by all who knew her, and her legacy of advocacy lives on.

Lastly, it is with tremendous pride I serve as **CT DCF's first Black Commissioner**.

When asked recently why declaring a 'first' in a position like this is even necessary? My response was simply, "... because representation matters."

In 2019, Gov Lamont was clear in his commitment to a diverse cabinet of subject matter experts. His nomination was thoughtful and intentional. I do my best to live up to the enormous responsibility of this role every day. I truly appreciate the hard work you all do to keep CT's children safe and families supported. It is an honor to lead such a dedicated workforce.

First and certainly not the last.

"Penelope Said, "I Need My Mommy""



Two-year-old Penelope is at peace with her father as they watch Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Of course, that is only when Little Baby Bum is not on the screen.

"Penelope loves daddy. She's a daddy's girl," stated her mother, Shani. "Kevin sings nursery rhymes to her and she jumps, smiles and laughs."

For Shani, Kevin's time with Penelope frees her to care for two-month-old twins, Olivia, who "listens wide eyed," and K.J., who "gazes with love." With three young children at home, Shani reflects on the moments in her life where due to medical complications, she did not believe she would be able to have children. "I can't believe it still," she stated.

The love and pride Shani and Kevin have for their children is palpable. They eagerly told their story about involvement with the Department of Children and Families, a period of intensive emotions while being separated from Penelope, partnering with the "best social worker ever," a team of community providers they embraced and how they are now giving back to the community.

"I found blessing in such a terrible situation," stated Shani.

Shani and Kevin relocated to Connecticut from Florida a year prior to Penelope's birth. When hospital staff expressed concerns at the time Penelope was born, the couple found themselves with scarce supports and it was determined she needed to come into care.

"I didn't sleep since the day they took her," stated Shani. Her fierce determination to be reunified with her daughter resulted in separating from Kevin temporarily, countless trips to the courthouse to find services, staying at a domestic violence shelter, and a hotel. "I did everything," she stated.

"I am woman, hear me roar when it comes to my child," stated Shani.



Shani also met Penelope's foster parent. They exchanged numbers and Shani was sent pictures of Penelope during milestone events. It was not enough. During this time, Penelope experienced feeding problems requiring frequent trips to the hospital. Shani would attend and work with the medical professionals to support her little girl.

Kevin's journey to care for his daughter saw him residing in a halfway house run by Community Partners in Action, staying on the couch of a friend and those days where he slept in a car - brushing his teeth and shaving in the reflection of the window - in preparation for work that day.

He too embraced supports from community agencies including the Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES) through My Peoples Clinical Services. "They were very good for me," Kevin stated. "I took a lot from what they had to offer. They worked wonders."



A common thread of Shani and Kevin was their desire to receive help and come together as a family. The most important common thread was the relationship they established with DCF Social Worker Lissette Harrison.

"She listened to me, saw me as a regular person. Rather than reading a paper thinking that is who I was," stated Shani. "Amazing" is how she describes Lissette and that in speaking with her, "I felt heard immediately." Shani also pointed out the involvement of DCF Social Work Supervisor Sara Wood and one touching moment in the hospital with Penelope. Shani was crying over the thought of missing Penelope's first bath. "You don't have to miss it," Shani recalls Sara saying. "She can have it right now." Together, they gave Penelope a bath.

Kevin's statements were equally as powerful. "I love the DCF staff. They were empowering to a certain extent." Despite describing himself as a "man's man" Kevin admits "everybody needs help." He was especially complimentary of Ernst Racine Jr. from Merveille Support Services who would bring Penelope to him for visits. "He was a big help as well. He was real good," stated Kevin recalling how they would sit and discuss the importance of being a father. In one documented interaction, Ernst wrote that Kevin leaned in and said to Penelope, "I am so proud to be your father."

During Penelope's time in care, she experienced feeding problems requiring frequent hospital visits. "She would not eat unless it was mommy, daddy or Lissette feeding her," stated Shani.

A mother's intuition and insights saw much more than a little baby with a medical condition. She was convinced the only way Penelope would get better would be if she was cared for by her parents. Also, that Penelope was sending everyone a message. "Penelope said I need my mommy," stated Shani. Her little girl was telling her she needed to come home.



Shani began residing at Inter Community - Coventry House, a 10-bed residential substance use program for women and their children. Here, she engaged in counseling and groups with other women in a similar situation. Shani was a leader in the program. She engaged in the Circle of Security parenting course, a program designed for parents and caregivers of

children who want to strengthen the bonds with their children and build secure relationships, with a focus on attachment.

With supports in place, the decision was made for Penelope to be reunified with Shani at Coventry House. "I finally got a good night's sleep," stated Shani the night Penelope came home. In contrast to the sleepless nights without her daughter. After a period of time, Shani and Kevin began residing together again in their own apartment.

"It was our pleasure to partner with Shani and Kevin in their journey with the Department. They took every opportunity that was offered to them to improve their lives and overcame the many obstacles they faced," stated Social Worker Lissette Harrison. "This family lacked resources, finances, and natural supports but they were able to persevere through it all. They also were faced with their daughter having many medical complexities which added to their stress."

"We believe that this family made a lot of gains as a result of their work with the Department, however, I believe myself and Social Worker Harrison learned just as much from them through the process and for that we will forever be inspired, and we feel honored to have been able to work with them. They touched our lives, and we wish the best for them going forward," stated Social Work Supervisor Sara Wood.

The couple has an active house. Penelope was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy and receives weekly physical therapy, speech and occupational therapy at Connecticut



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Shani is taking on-line classes to achieve a degree in Business with the long-term goal to obtain a Master's in Business Marketing.

The couple has also found time at Coventry House and speak to the children there about relationships, substance abuse, healthy choices, parenting and staying on the right path in life. "I speak what I feel. Tell them my own story," stated Kevin.

What would they say to other parents about working with the Department of Children and Families?

"Do it. Work with them and not against them," Shani would tell others. "Follow the roadmap. If you work with DCF, you will see they help you more than you realize."

"DCF is for you and not against you. Open up. Do not be afraid," stated Kevin.

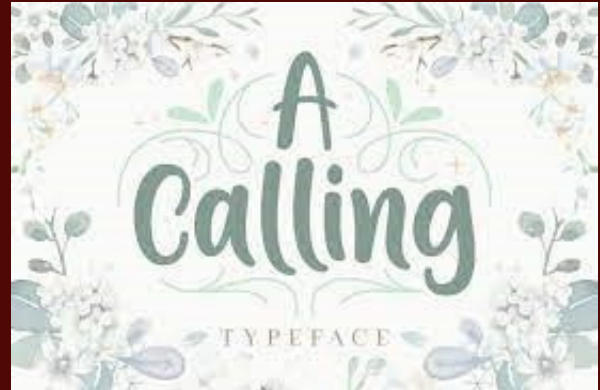
"They are allies for your children."

Note: The names have been changed in this story to protect the identifies of the family.



"How Can I Make Myself Part of the Village?"

When Tomi Handy began her career 23 years ago, she probably did not envision singing Beyonce songs with one of her children in care. "Do the simple things that join you and that family," she stated when asked how she engages with the children and families she serves. "Know your kid, talk to providers, spend hours on the phone. Talk to them, form a relationship," she added.

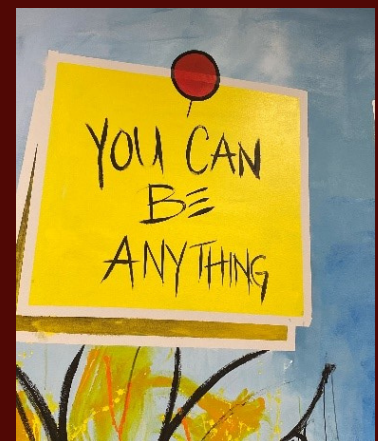


It is easy to see why Tomi is successful. She refers to her daily work as a "calling" and her life experiences prepared her well for the complexities of being a Department of Children and Families Social Worker.

Tomi is a leader in her own family. While in college, she came home to be at the side of a relative who was dying of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Walking down the hallway after a visit, she saw the name of another relative on a different hospital room door who was inflicted with the same disease. "I never really had a chance to say goodbye," Tomi stated. The two relatives died of AIDS a week apart. "How do we change this?" she remembers asking herself.

Tomi recites the time her aunt was stabbed by her husband, and she took quick action, moving her cousins aged 14 years and 2 years old into the second floor of her multi-family home. "We gutted the floor for them to have a place to stay. I wanted the home to resemble the home that they left." What followed was Tomi navigating a complex set of family dynamics to ensure the children's needs were met amongst many competing demands.

Working at a dance studio, Tomi heard about DCF's work. Here she met Renee Hoff who was a current DCF employee. It was Renee's outreach which encouraged Tomi to apply. "We need faces like us to make a difference," she recalls Renee telling her. Impressing upon Tomi that the Department needed a more diverse workforce in order to provide effective interventions.



Tomi gives credit to her first Social Work Supervisor, Sally Fleming, who made a significant impact on her - leading by example and taking young staff under her wing. It was Sally who would accompany her workers on home visits, court and was by their side when a child on their caseload required a doctor's visit due to a medical complication. In these circumstances, she was modeling the true essence of being a social worker.

It is these personal and professional experiences that Tomi has brought to the Permanency Unit for the past 20 years.

It is who she is that made her a perfect fit for the most difficult case of her career. In March of 2018, Tomi was assigned to a little three-year-old girl named Alivia, whose mother and sister were murdered by her mother's boyfriend. Alivia was being cared for by her grandmother, Ms. Corinna Martin, who had already lost a previous daughter to a domestic violence homicide. [See Alivia's full story here.](#)



The pressures were felt immediately as the journey towards Alivia's permanency took many difficult roads. Tomi played whatever role she needed - just like she was taught. She took Alivia everywhere and they made quite a team during frequent drives to school, attending meetings and arranging therapeutic supports. The work was emotionally draining to see Alivia's tears, to hear the difficult

questions she asked as her understanding of her life circumstances grew, Alivia's trauma responses and the pain Ms. Martin expressed losing two daughters. The "weight" on Tomi's shoulders was "hard."

"Everyone had to check their grief and loss," stated Tomi. Difficult especially the day Ms. Martin asked her to attend the sentencing hearing for the man who killed her daughter. Tomi sat "shoulder to shoulder" with Ms. Martin in the courtroom. "It was work but it felt personal," Tomi stated.

"How can I make myself part of the village?" she would ask. "Sometimes what you do is not in the job description. You are not asked. You do it to support the family," Tomi stated.

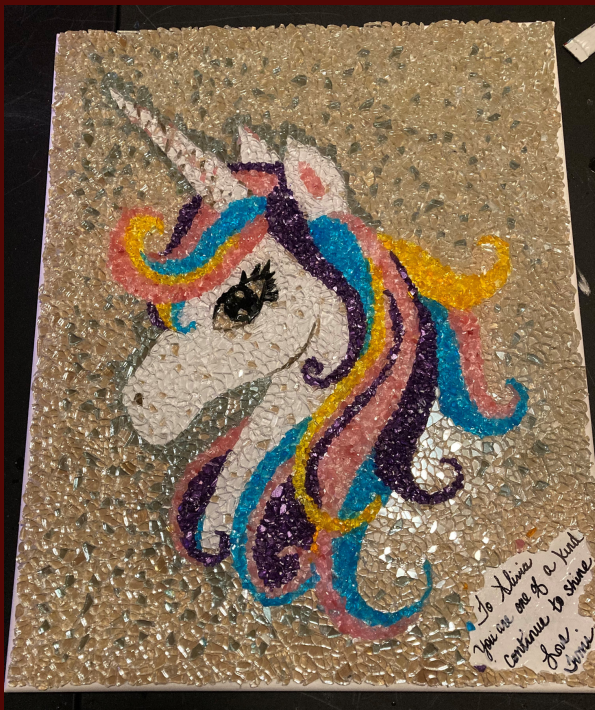
"Just do it."

Her work does not go unnoticed. "With Tomi, it's always been about the kids and that's hard to do sometimes.... with all the bureaucracy. I've seen her stay long hours after work visiting a kid in the hospital and going out of her way in order for a child to get the perfect gift for their birthday. These are the stories and actions that can never be captured in data and no pivot table or graph can ever calculate or measure her commitment to this work and more importantly.... the children she serves," stated Office Director Dr. Dakibu Muley.



"There are days when you are not okay," stated Tomi. During these times is when her "use of self" saw her drawing upon the strengths of her own personal experiences and the reasons why she came to the Department.

Tomi finds painting, drawing, and decorating therapeutic. In fact, she won an award in a Connecticut museum for "Best glass artist." Tomi made Alivia a stained-glass picture of a unicorn. "I wanted her to remember the good times we had," she stated.



"Tomi has always demonstrated a true commitment to the families that she works with. She prioritizes their needs and has demonstrated a willingness to go well above and beyond to be available to them. As a permanency social worker, she has developed tremendous relationships with her kids and families that have led to many successful permanent outcomes for children," stated Program Supervisor John Rogers.

In her colleagues, Tomi finds strength and likewise, her colleagues find strength in Tomi. "We use each other for supervision," Tomi stated. The unit prides themselves on their outcomes for children and families.



On National Adoption Day, Alivia's formal permanency was established with Ms. Martin. It was widely covered by the Connecticut media.

"Ms. Martin you have made Alivia a better person. Alivia you have made your grandma a better caretaker but you both have made me a better social worker," Ms. Handy stated during the proceedings.

"All those times of advocacy made it worthwhile," stated Tomi.

What would she tell new workers coming into the Department? "It is going to be a struggle. You will have good days and bad days. It's all worth it," was Tomi's response.

"It's cases like this that give me hope that we do good work, we make things better, we have good outcomes."

Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award: 2022 Recipients and Nominees

Each year the Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award is given to a DCF staff person who has demonstrated a strong passion for children and families, shown an unyielding concern, and taken action towards the advancement and betterment of those on their caseload, or within the Black community.

Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award Nominees



Dr. Williams served as the agency's Medical Director for several years prior to her passing. She left a legacy of devoted and compassionate service to Connecticut's children and families.

Dr. Williams was also an active presence in her local community, utilizing her knowledge and skills to give back in unique ways.

Congratulations to **Anthony Gay** for being awarded the 2022 Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award! Anthony is a 20-year veteran of the Department currently working as a Social Work Supervisor in the Torrington Office.

The Department also posthumously provided this award to **Mary Brantley** who passed away last year after a 32-year career with the Department. Mary was a FASU worker in Bridgeport. We were honored that her family was in attendance at the award ceremony.

Congratulations to all of the nominees:

Darline Pearsall - Social Worker out of the Milford Area Office

Bridget Elliot - Social Worker Case Aide out of the Norwalk Area Office

Christine Wagner Morella - Social Work Supervisor out of the New Britain Area Office

Lorraine Thomas - Social Worker Supervisor out of Norwich Area Office

Dr. Nicole Taylor - Director of Pediatrics

Marlene Graham - Intake Social Worker out of New Haven Area Office

T'eairez Atunbi - Social Worker out of the Norwich Area Office

Samantha Rodrigues - Social Worker out of the Norwich Area Office

JoShonda Guerrier - Administrator for the Clinical and Community Consultation Support Division

Yolanda Chapman Smith - Norwalk Office Director

Crystal Williams - Program Supervisor currently under the Community Mental Health Division in Central Office and recently transferred from Meriden Area Office



2022
DR. JANET E. WILLIAMS
HUMANITARIAN AWARD
WINNER

Anthony Gay



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WILLIAMS E.
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