

Department of Children and Families  
**SPOTLIGHT ON WHAT'S RIGHT**



## *A Message from Commissioner Dorantes...*



### **May is National Foster Care Month**

May is busy! Thanks to all staff who participated in our Town Hall to discuss the post Juan F. Consent Decree vision! Internal quality assurance and improvement, along with thoughtful decision making and transparency in our work, will allow us to sustain the tremendous achievements we have made!

May brings National Foster Care Month and the tireless efforts of our foster and adoptive parents. They have continued to say "yes" when receiving the call to open their homes to a child - most likely one they have never met.

Thank you to our partners at the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Parents (CAFAF) for their 27th annual conference with this year's theme, "Supporting the Supporter." How nice it was to celebrate our foster parent in person!

Connecticut is fortunate to have approximately 93% of children in our care and custody placed with families, with over 44% of children placed with kin.

This month we highlight Willie Robinson and his strength as a kinship provider, overcoming his own personal challenges, to provide a home for a young boy.

The effects of the right family at the right time can be seen in the story of Vincent Espino. Read about his life's journey and the kinship family who supported him - from homelessness to the White House to becoming a DCF employee.

Thank you, nurses! You continue to serve our children and families in Facilities and Regional Offices through the most of trying times.



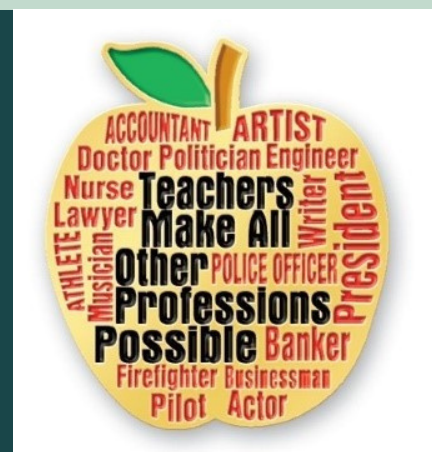
Have you thanked a teacher lately? May is also Teacher Appreciation Month. Teachers, we celebrate you!

Congratulations to Gabrielle Mitchell, MSW, who provided the 2022 commencement address at the University of Connecticut! Watch it [here on YouTube](#).

May is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. The term, "Asian Pacific Islander" evolved in the 1980's and 1990's, and the White House Office of Management and Budget finally broke the terms "Asian" and "Pacific Islander" into two separate racial categories in 1997.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. This past legislative session brought us significant legislation supports for children's mental health. Look for further updates soon on what is coming our way!

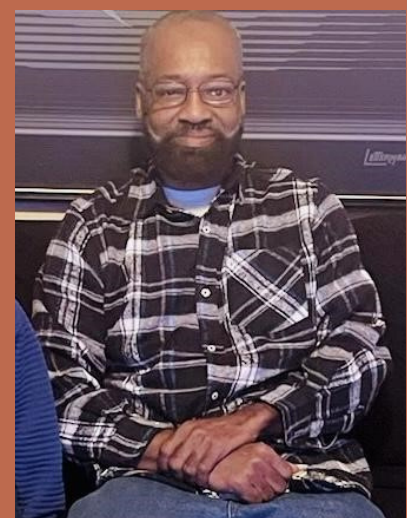
Stay safe and strong everyone!



## Willie Robinson Gives Back

“Let his mother go and get herself some help. With time and grace, people can change,” explained Willie Robinson, who is currently licensed by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to provide kinship care.

Willie is caring for his biological son, Brian aged 13, and another child for whom Willie considers a son as he has acted as a father figure for this young boy throughout his life. The boys have lived together literally forever and were raised as brothers.



Willie believes that with the proper support and resources, environments and people can heal. When asked about the long-term plan for the child placed into his care, Willie emphatically stated, "To go back to his mother, of course," adding, "When she is ready to have him, I will help make that happen for all of us."

The trajectory of Willie Robinson's life has not always been an easy one. He experienced years of substance abuse, criminal involvement, and unhealthy relationships. Willie's familiarity with DCF stems back to when his children, Joshua and Shaneria, were young and were removed from his care. "You better get those kids back right away," Willie remembers his mother saying. He spent six months accepting services and working hard to get his children back home. "It was at a time when fathers were not valued like they are today, it was really hard to have anyone see me for the good father I strived to be, they were looking only at their mother," stated Willie.

Willie eventually received custody not only of Joshua and Shaneria, but also of his stepdaughter, who he raised as his own. His stepdaughter and son are now young adults, doing well with their careers. Shaneria is in the National Guard and is the first African American woman to work on the Blackhawk helicopter. She is now in college and will soon graduate with a degree in education.

The pride that Willie has for his children, is mirrored by the pride they have in him. "My dad is someone I could always count on," Shaneria Robinson explained. "I am so proud of him for taking on the role of a foster parent," she added.

Six months ago, DCF became involved with this boy Willie knew so well, and given that family's circumstances, placement was required. It was his son Brian who asked his father if they could open their home and make their family a little bigger.

Willie said he didn't hesitate to agree, but because of his earlier protective service history with the Department, he would require a waiver from the



Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families to be licensed. He said his heart was hurting to imagine this child lost in the system.

The Department believes in rehabilitation. The waiver process was established for individuals who have experienced issues in their past which may preclude them from currently being licensed; it allows them to demonstrate that their past history does not impact their current ability to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing home to a child.

Willie benefitted from multiple agencies who supported him on his journey towards healing and recovery and enabled him to become a kinship provider. He provided documentation to the Department and engaged in lengthy discussions about his previous challenges and how he was a different person today than he was years ago. The recommendations received clearly pointed to a changed man.



*Brian Robinson*

"This is what our department stands for," stated Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes. "People deserve a second chance. Willie Robinson changed his life, and he now has the opportunity to change the life of another person. We are grateful for his partnership and his willingness to assist this young child in need."

"We believe in the strength of our families and their ability to change the course of their lives," affirmed Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams. "Our past should not define us or prevent someone from enriching the life of a child. Willie Robinson is a great example of how the systems works in the best interests of children."

Social Work Supervisor Heather Jones supported Willie throughout the licensing process. "Mr. Robinson took everything in stride. He was open and honest, maintained a calm and respectful dignity and grace, displayed patience, and truly wanted to help us move forward despite how many times we contacted him with questions regarding his criminal and DCF history. He was clear that he wanted us to be sure and get this right, not for him, not just for the Department and its policies, but for this young boy. He never questioned the process. He knew this was important to his son Brian as well, to ensure that he would have his friend at home with them," Heather stated.

Willie believes in forgiveness and never denies a child's mother the dignity and respect she deserves. He explained that he understands this child's mother has had some challenges, and as she heals, he is present for this young boy and wants him to always carry love in his heart for his mother.

Willie understands the Department’s initial hesitance to consider him as a licensed kinship provider and is grateful for second chances.

“When assessing resources for licensing, we need to take the time to review their history and understand their life story,” stated Program Supervisor Cathy Waylen, who was previously assigned the case. “This case was a good example of how the way we used to practice as an agency was not as supportive to Mr. Robinson and his family as our practice is today”.

“It’s just the three of us now, and the puppy,” stated Willie. As he enjoys retirement and working side jobs for extra income, the boys both have daily chores, attend church, and are doing exceptionally well in school and sports.

Reflecting on his Sunday plans, Willie said with such warmth and excitement, “We have a birthday party to attend this afternoon and then we’ll sit down together and eat our Sunday meal.”

Willie believes in the values of love and respect and has accepted Jesus into his heart. He just wants to be good to people, to be kind.

“I’m not a perfect father, but my love and commitment to my boys are as perfect as they can be.”

Willie's story reflects the mission and values of our Department. Our staff worked closely with Mr. Robinson to ensure that the transition for the boys did not result in the disruption of their most cherished relationships, undermining their development and sense of belonging.

We are grateful to you, Willie Robinson, for your humility, grace, and commitment to your children.

*\*Some details of this family were changed to ensure confidentiality*



# From Homelessness and Kinship Care to the White House - Meet Vince Espino



"It's not what happened in your story which defines you. It's what you do with it," stated Vince Espino.

Homeless as an adolescent, Vince would sleep in a local park or on the roof of nearby schools. Little did others know about his struggles to remain safe and "couch surf" while navigating life as a teenager.

Vince is now a DCF Social Worker, a husband, father to little Ava, a big brother, and an advocate. The chapters in his story tell and describe resilience, determination, and the strength of a young man to persevere despite what life presented.

From homelessness and kinship care to the White House - this is the story of Vince Espino.

Vince was born to a 17-year-old father and raised in a single parent home as his mother left the family shortly after his birth. It was not until decades later that he first met her.

Family life was not easy for him or his siblings. Vince knew he had to make a change as living at home was no longer an option. This also meant he had to leave his younger brothers behind. Three days before his 14th birthday, the summer before his freshmen year in high school, Vince made the tough decision to leave home.

Eventually, while utilizing a local park to rest, he awoke to a couple of teenagers playing catch with a football nearby. After approaching them, they explained that they were on their way to football conditioning before the start of the school year. Vince joined the teenagers and met many other football players in his soon to be high school and built the courage to ask, "Do you mind if I sleep over?" The offer was accepted and for over the next year, Vincent with his "backpack filled with clothes, a blanket and a toothbrush," made an actual schedule with his teammates as to which of their homes he would eat and sleep on a given day. When school began, his options of homes expanded to his peers in his classes, especially his ROTC classmates

Initially, finding places to stay was easy. "If you are the smart kid in math class, everyone wants you around," he laughed.

When housing options became scarce, Vince slept in Fulton Park - just over one mile from the Department of Children and Families Office in Waterbury. His spot was a wooded area "between the swimming pool and basketball court," Vince remembered. This is where he rested his head between 15-20 times.



On multiple occasions, Vince slept on the roof of Kennedy High School noting that the roof was covered with gravel and sand making it hard to lay down. A short walk away was Westside Middle School where the roof was "smoother" and had the nicest view of the city.

In moments of desperation, Vince would jump over a fence at the Home Depot gardening section to take water or Gatorade from a cooler, as he had nothing else to drink.

Contact with his father or his siblings was almost non-existent. "Dad, I want to come home," he once said during an impromptu meeting. Vince recalls his father laughed at him and turned away.

Despite these obstacles, Vince went to school each day and excelled in the classroom.

Vince's story took a significant turn after a football injury. He sprained an ankle and suffered what was believed to be a hernia. Alone, he went to the emergency department and was questioned by the doctor as to where his parents were, if they would consent to treatment and why he was not living at home. Vince was clear in his response. "Don't send me back there," he told the doctor. He limped out of the hospital and slept in the park again that night.

Shortly thereafter, Vince was visited by two DCF Social Workers at school. He was informed that his father filed a Family With Service Needs petition (FWSN) indicating Vince was beyond his control, as well as a missing person's report with the police.



Vince was required to attend a hearing in the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters. He advocated for himself and obtained letters from school personnel expressing their confidence in his abilities. The judge presented Vince with tough options which included being remanded to juvenile detention; placement on house arrest and wearing an ankle bracelet while attempting to work out his relationship with his father; or going into foster care.

"I want to go to foster care," Vince told the Judge. From there, he was ordered into the Department's custody and was placed into a Short-Term Assessment and Respite (STAR) home which is a congregate care facility. He stayed for almost two months.

Vince pursued finding his own family to live with and had a conversation with a friend of his whose family previously allowed him to stay at their home two days a week and on alternating weekends. Vince explained his situation. "You are always welcome to stay here," Vincent remembered his friend's mother, Ms. Xiomara Nunez, saying to him. The Nunez family agreed to become licensed and care for him.

After almost two years of fending for himself, Vince found a home.

It was Vince's Social Worker, David Spagnoletti, who advocated for him to be placed with the Nunez family. Vince speaks candidly of how his relationship with David changed his life. "Dave had a lot of confidence in me that I did not have in myself," Vince stated.

"Vince was a great adolescent to work with. I continue to keep in touch with him and have enjoyed watching him flourish into a father, husband and professional. Vincent would take advantage of any opportunities he came across. Vincent is a diligent and hard worker. I think I got as much, if not more, out of being his social worker as he got from me being his social worker," explained David.

Vince excelled with the Nunez family. With the urging of David, Waterbury YAB Coordinator Lee Debarrows, and former Office Director Patti Zuccarelli, he became involved in the statewide Youth Advisory Board (YAB). He refers to Patti as his "guardian angel" for always watching out for him.







Thru the YAB, his advocacy began. He was asked by former Commissioner Joette Katz how the Department could make his life better. "I left my brothers behind," Vince stated while emphasizing the importance of developing statutes and policies which reinforce maintaining sibling connections. Vince also stated he was not proud of the "foster kid" title, as it had a negative connotation and requested the Department's language to change.

Vince became actively involved in developing the Siblings Bill of Rights, Reasonable and Prudent Parenting Standards for foster parents, and the Siblings Visitation Bills of Rights, all of which passed the Connecticut

legislature. He also represented the Department at the New England Youth Coalition.

College was next. He and David were halfway to UCONN for a tour when he asked for David to turn back around as he was not ready to leave Waterbury yet. He began taking classes at Naugatuck Valley Community College (NVCC).

While enrolled at NVCC, Vince took a "random" social work class. "This is outdated," he thought of the curriculum. "This is what happens behind the scenes," is what he would tell the professor and his fellow classmates regarding the field of social work. Vince quickly decided he would graduate from NVCC with an Associates in Pre-Social Work. Before he knew it, he was just a semester away before his graduation. Little did he know he would have much more to celebrate.

One of Vince's strongest memories while living with the Nunez family was President Barack Obama's re-election to office. The family celebrated and gathered around the television to watch the historic moment. Later that evening, Vince and his foster brother laid awake in their bedroom and imagined what it would be like to go to the White House. They questioned if "kids like us" would ever go. "I would definitely take advantage of the opportunity if it came our way," was Vince's response.

Just a little over a year later, the invitation came! Vince thought the e-mail was a joke, and it was David Spagnoletti who convinced him it was real. He would be going with other youth from Connecticut and Department Senior Administrators. Vincent immediately informed his foster family, and he and his foster brother shouted with excitement when they realized that their daydreams were becoming reality.

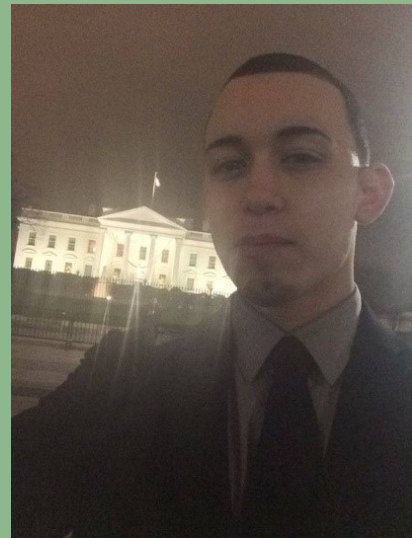
David bought Vince a suit and made sure it was color coordinated with his tie. It was David, teaching Vince with the use of a mirror, to learn how to tie that tie. "He always had my back," Vince stated while referring to David.

Vince visited the White House with four other DCF involved youth. They took a tour and watched a premiere of Annie. Vince met actor Jamie Foxx, after inadvertently sitting in his seat, and had a discussion with actress Cameron Diaz.

He also met Vice President Joe Biden, who would later become the President of the United States.

With Department support, Vince then began living in his own apartment, bought his first car, and enrolled in the Social Work program at Western Connecticut State University (WCSU).

The combination of his own resilience, care of the Nunez family and DCF support, assisted Vince in pursuing his dreams. When he was close to graduation, and in need of continued DCF services, Vince clearly remembers Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams granting him an extension to receive DCF support. Vince later graduated WCSU with a BA in Social Work while also receiving the Senior Social Work Student of the Year Award.



Vince was the first in his family, and in the Nunez family, to graduate from college.

Why did he choose to work at DCF? "Imagine how many people I can impact," was one of his thoughts. "I had a cheat code in my head," he would explain on how to support those the Agency serves.

Vince has now been an employee in the Danbury Office for approximately 4 years.

He is an Ongoing Services unit and takes every opportunity to positively promote the Agency's work. He has even gone back to the New England Youth Coalition - as an adult supporting youth - and frequently speaks publicly about his experiences.

"Vince pulls from his own experience and brings energy and passion for this work to all of the families he works with. He has a great ability to connect with youth, encouraging them to engage in services and helping them identify permanent lifelong connections. Vince has a great ability to see the strengths in people, helping them recognize those strengths and build upon them for success," stated Program Supervisor Jennifer Birden.



Office Director Kelly McVey also spoke highly of him and the way he relates to others. "Vince's passion for youth and adolescent work stems from his personal journey. He has a passion to help and see young people succeed. He leads that work with his own experience in mind. His value for preparing our young people is something he does daily and helps shape the work at DCF to assure access and opportunities for success. He's real, open, and reflective. He's relatable and that is by design. He knows that's what young people understand and deserve," Kelly stated.

Vince has many messages for new employees. "Learn the job," he clearly stated while emphasizing its complexities. Vince explains engagement is the key to developing a supportive relationship with those we serve. He described one home visit where he brought a baseball glove and played catch with a youth for over 30 minutes to develop that trust.

Vince is also playing the role of big brother again as he has reconnected with his siblings after they read about his successes in the newspaper. His father is "proud" of him and last year, he met his mother. His wedding included his birth and kinship families.

"Each and every one of us has story," he stated.

The chapters in Vincent Espino's life are far from over, and we cannot wait to see what is next.



## DCF Social Worker Gabrielle Mitchell Delivers UCONN MSW Commencement Address

Gabrielle Mitchell stood proudly in her cap and gown. With the tassel placed to the right, it was almost time to be awarded a Master's Degree in Social Work from the University of Connecticut. But first, she had one more assignment - deliver the class of 2022 commencement address!

Gabrielle listened intently as a UCONN faculty member introduced her. "Wow, I really have put in the work," she thought to herself while listening to her biography being read to the hundreds in attendance.

After repeatedly reciting the speech over a period of weeks, the moment had finally come - the podium was hers.

"Take a moment to breathe in the air around you and reflect on what it took to get you here today. You deserve this and you earned this," Gabrielle told her classmates. "You pushed yourselves to finish what you started despite any emotional, physical and mental hardships you may have faced these past couple of years. So please give yourself a round of applause and bask in this moment."

Gabrielle easily could have been talking to herself.

It took over two long years to finally be able to walk across the stage in front of family and friends and receive her diploma. Those years were personally grueling. Gabrielle worked as a Social Worker with the Department of Children and Families, engaged in graduate classes, took part an internship with families diagnosed with HIV, and completed an internal internship with DCF, as well as overcame a serious health condition during that time.



The commencement address delivered many themes, from acknowledging the trauma associated with COVID-19 to reminding students to be "fearless" and not to become "complacent" with the systems that are in place and to challenge the way things are done. Gabrielle encouraged the student body to give those they will serve the tools to advocate for themselves when the work is completed and to be excited and ready for the challenges which lay ahead. These messages all contain the values and ideals Gabrielle embodies. The full commencement address is available to [view here](#).

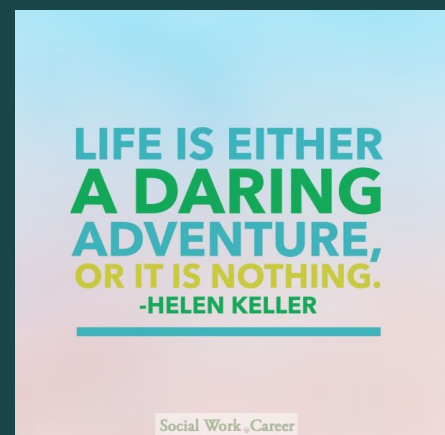
Gabrielle has spent over four years as an Ongoing Services Worker with DCF. Prior to joining the Agency, she was part of a team at the Wheeler Clinic substance abuse and crisis stabilization programs. Out of high school, she began her work with vulnerable populations as she was a daycare assistant in a maternity home for unwed teenage mothers eventually leaving to conduct non-profit work at the Boys and Girls Club.

"I love achieving permanence for children," she stated when asked why she has remained with the Department. "Transparency with families is key," whether you are delivering good or bad news. As best you can, be "open, honest and transparent," she added. When this occurs, families are not caught off-guard. "Families know if they do their part, I will do mine."

"Gabrielle is a caring, compassionate Social Worker who is a strong advocate for equality among all the clients she services. Gabrielle will go above and beyond to make certain she is doing all that can be done to meet the needs of her families while ensuring the safety of the children on her caseload. The positive outcomes on Gabrielle's cases are a true testament to her commitment and dedication to making a difference in the lives of others," stated Social Work Supervisor Amy Gionfriddo. Former Program Supervisor Cathy Waylen also spoke highly of her Gabrielle and her accomplishments. "Gabrielle is a warm, compassionate social worker who is always striving to improve her practice so she can offer the best service to her clients. She is an asset to the agency and to the children and families she serves," Cathy remarked.

"I had no idea of all the things the job entailed before I took the job," Gabrielle stated.

One set of activities she spoke about was how she actively works to implement the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) principles and "nurture" the birth family and foster family relationship to "create a bond from the beginning as best you can" which will lead to quicker permanency for children.



"Ms. Mitchell, fondly known as Gabbie in our office, is a true social worker at heart. She approaches her work with compassion, honesty, and respect. She builds trust and involves other resources, staff, fathers, and kin to help families through the toughest of times. What impresses me most is her adaptability to unique situations. She's a quick thinker and invites teamwork. Her ultimate goal is always to help families and children. Gabbie often goes above and beyond for her families, showing kindness and acceptance. She is one of the first social workers to notice and give when families need a birthday or holiday gifts for their children and food for a nice meal. We are so very proud of her and all of her accolades. When I think about the next generation of social workers, I feel hopeful to know we have people like Gabbie working at DCF," stated Meriden Office Director Maribel Martinez.



Gabrielle's decision to obtain her MSW was grounded in her desires to gain additional knowledge, take her work to the "next level" and advance within the Department. "I love this work and I'm going to stick around," she stated.

While at UCONN, Gabrielle excelled in the classroom and within the internship programs. She was named Co-Chair of the Organization of Black Social Work Students from 2020-2021, and each semester organized wellness events from virtual yoga and painting to serving on the Black History 365 Committee.

Life then took a very serious turn.

In October 2020, Gabrielle began experiencing anxiety and became easily overheated causing her to pass out. She was diagnosed with a thyroid condition and in December 2021 required surgery to resolve it. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) helped her to "listen to her body" and seek additional support on her journey to heal.

After the procedure, Gabrielle went right back to her determined ways. School and the internship were back in session. As she regained her strength, excellent news came her way.

In March, Gabrielle was nominated by faculty to receive the 2022 Outstanding Senior Women's Academic Achievement Award from the UCONN Women's Center and to deliver the commencement address. "It was nice to be recognized when I didn't know I was being recognized," she stated. Gabrielle earned a 4.0 GPA throughout the MSW program.

This month, Gabrielle received the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAF) Social Worker of the Year Award for the Meriden Office. She was nominated by CAFAF Liaison Deb Candelora. "Throughout the pandemic, I continued to see Gabbie's smile on the screen often. She continued engaging families with support and services and jumped right in when asked to learn about QPI. Gabbie is always respectful and goes the extra mile," Deb stated. She was presented the award by Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.

As Gabrielle looked out from the podium after 2.5 years of extensive effort and challenges along the way while delivering the commencement address, what did she think? "I felt so powerful and proud," she stated.

"They were locked in," she added when discussing the audience.

How did Gabrielle achieve all of this? Perhaps her own words during the commencement speech could answer this question.

"Hope is your anchor, the community is your anchor, and you are your anchor."

Congratulations to Gabrielle Mitchell, MSW - Class of 2022!

