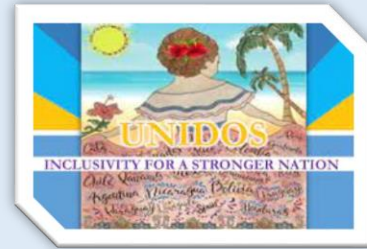


Commissioner's Message



September is National **Kinship Care Month**. Connecticut continues to be a leader across the country with approximately 51% of children under the age of 18 years old, who are placed into a family setting, residing with kin.

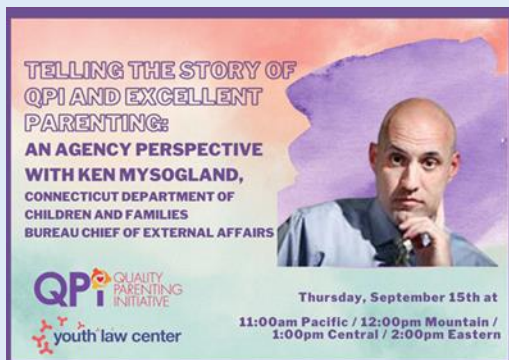
The diversity of our workforce and amongst the families we serve is to be continuously honored and celebrated. "*Unidos*" is the theme of **Hispanic and Latino a/x Heritage Month 2022!** Inclusion and all voices at the table result in stronger more sustainable planning. All families and communities deserve our best acknowledgement and respect for their heritage, culture and language. Please read our "*Spotlight on What's Right*" about **Jackie Vidal** - recipient of the first **Yocasta Del Rosario Memorial Award**.



Across the country, **988** has been designated as the new three-digit dialing code that will route callers to the *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline*. We all must continue to lift the stigma of seeking support during **Suicide Awareness Prevention Month** and every day. *In 2021, 14 children ages 11 through 17 took their own lives in CT, with the mean age of 15.3 years old, and gender being equally distributed (7M, 7F). 71% of the children identified as white. More children under the age of 13 died by suicide in 2021 than have previously been recorded. The increased number of younger children in Connecticut who have died by suicide is also part of a national trend. Across the country, suicide is now the second leading cause of preventable death in children starting at age 10 (CFRP21annual).*

"*It's been a long journey, but I am still on it.*" Words spoken by **Ashley May Williams** as she tells us her story of achieving over 1,000 days of sobriety. **September's Recovery Month** theme - "*Recovery is for Everyone. Every Person. Every Family. Every Community.*" Ashley has many powerful messages for all of us about recovery, engagement, and reclaiming her new life!

We know the impact of substance misuse. We recognize the importance of consultation with our Area Resource Group (ARG) clinicians as we observe, assess, and refer those persons struggling to maintain sobriety. Child safety remains our priority. A sober caregiver is what every child needs to be safe and adequately cared for.



"*The Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) is based on the belief that every child needs to grow up in a caring family and that the primary goal of foster care must be to ensure that children and youth in the system receive excellent parenting every single day through committed, developmentally informed relationships with the adults caring for them.*" <https://www.qpi4kids.org/principles-of-qpi/> The principles of QPI were reinforced and on full display this month. Our Bureau Chief of External Affairs, **Ken Mysogland**, presented a webinar to a national audience of QPI jurisdictions on how



excellent parenting sustains lifelong family ties. CT was also represented in Reno, Nevada by a team led by Foster Care Director, Natalia Liriano during the Youth Law Center's **QPI Champions Conference**.

Speaking of enhancing our skills of assessment and engagement, September is **Child Welfare Workforce**



Development Month - a time to celebrate our achievements, "recharge" and enhance our skills. "*Thank you Dad,*" is how Destiny Bromfield referred to Social Work Supervisor Brian Smith during a recent Youth Advisory Board Meeting. Read how Destiny refers to the 6 years under Brian's supervision and his never-ending belief in her abilities, his patience and how she looks to the future.

Enjoy this month's "*Spotlight on What's Right*" Newsletter and let's keep those positive stories coming!

Stay strong everyone!

"I did this."



On the 1,000th day of her sobriety, Ashley May-Williams "shimmied in the living room and ate steak for dinner" with her children. She paused and reflected back on the realities of what her life was and what it has become. However, this moment was not simply about her.

"It was also 1,000 days of trust for my kids," she stated.

The lessons Ashley has learned during treatment, maintaining sobriety, unpacking painful life experiences and the example she has set for her family are ones she now seeks to impart onto others.

Ashley is the teacher, and we are the students.

"I was broken," is how Ashley describes her life leading to an emotional dependency on alcohol. Drinking was her "crutch" when her anxiety was heightened. She describes it as an "invisible brick wall" in which she needed to "squeeze" her "soul through the cracks" to get through a normal day. "Alcohol numbed my fears."

Ashley was also engaged in a decades long unhealthy relationship. She endured emotional and financial control and an overall feeling of "not being important." Living in isolation became her daily routine as she infrequently left her home and experienced strained interactions with her parents, siblings, and friends. Alcohol became her "only coping mechanism for life."

"Use of alcohol as regulator is normalized in society," Ashley stated. With television and print ads associating a "good time" with the use of alcohol, "you don't want to think you don't have control."

Often, individuals wait too long to seek support.

"Fear of judgment causes so many not to get help," she stated.



Ashley also feared involvement with the Department of Children and Families who began working with the family. Her experiences with the Agency empowered her as she found caring and open-minded staff who engaged with her during one of the most difficult times in her life.

"DCF held my hand. It was not forced or coerced."

"They are angels among us," is how she refers to DCF social workers as well as the therapists from the Family Based Recovery (FBR) program who came into her life. "They wanted my home to be safe for me and my kids." There were no judgments - simply offers of encouragement and support.

FBR began visiting Ashley three times a week. They went deep to help Ashley understand the root cause of her alcohol use, anxiety, and other stressors. "I did not realize all of the things that affected me," Ashley recalls. Her family tree, childhood experiences and current relationships were discussed in detail over and over again.

Her children watched intently.



As Ashley was open with others, she was equally as transparent with her children who knew of her struggles. They saw their mother working closely with in-home providers, allowing them to experience both her commitment to recovery and vulnerabilities. "Being brave does not mean you are not scared," she stated. Ashley believes her children grew to respect her even more seeing the process up front and close.

Ashley describes therapy as having a "trickledown effect" on her children. What she learns, she passes onto them. They in turn teach others. Perhaps the biggest benefit of this is that Ashley is teaching her children how to ask for help - something she did not learn as a child.

Ashley was quick to point out that sobriety and recovery are "intergenerational" just like the "intergenerational survival" and "intergenerational mistrust" she felt growing up which in part led to her alcohol use.

Ashley remains open with her children on the days recovery becomes difficult. "I do not pretend it is easy," she stated.

For the Child Welfare professionals reading her story, what does Ashley want them to know about the profound impact they have on those they serve?

"Lead with an open heart," was Ashley's first point. Understand the pain the person is experiencing when they are sitting across from you. "They are hurting. They are hurting bad. When they drink or use, the hurting stops," Ashley stated.

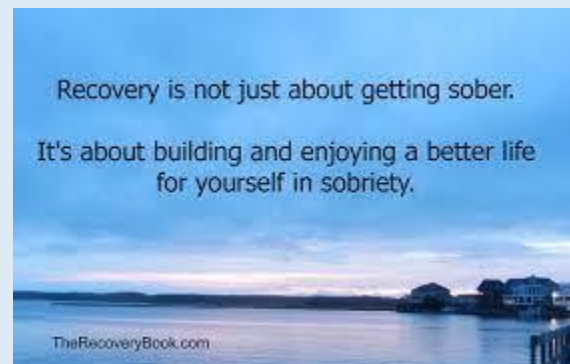
The negative stigma of asking for help is very real and deters those from seeking support. "Focus on the strengths and not weaknesses," Ashley advises. She advocates for a twice a year mental health checkup like going to a dentist. Early detection may prove very beneficial. "Make it something you can talk about."

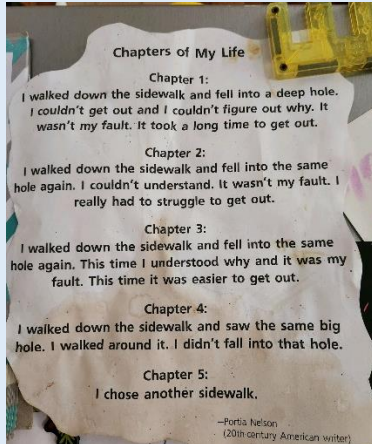
What Ashley also wants others to know about recovery is that the work is not easy, quick, nor does it truly end.

"It's been a long journey, but I am still on it," she stated.

"You have to trust the process. It is a hard process, but it is so beautiful on the other side."

The former disempowered and disconnected Ashley May-Williams is now the current Lion Scouts Den Chief for her two youngest children. She hosted a gathering in her home recently and the group had their first campout. "This is why I worked so hard," is what she thought as her children ran across a field playing with others.





Chapters of My Life

Chapter 1:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into a deep hole. I couldn't get out and I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't my fault. It took a long time to get out.

Chapter 2:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. I couldn't understand. It wasn't my fault. I really had to struggle to get out.

Chapter 3:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. This time I understood why and it was my fault. This time it was easier to get out.

Chapter 4:

I walked down the sidewalk and saw the same big hole. I walked around it. I didn't fall into that hole.

Chapter 5:

I chose another sidewalk.

-Portia Nelson
(20th century American writer)

One night, she played a game with her four children to see who could go the longest without smiling. "I lost immediately," she stated. Not hard to imagine given the life she has created for herself and those around her.

Recovery and sobriety touch everyone in her life. Ashley has re-established relationships with her parents, siblings and friends but has also stopped contact with others who did not necessarily want to see her succeed.

Each day is a new beginning.

Her teachings are not done. Ashley recently filmed a segment on the DCF YouTube channel - "*Doors to Hope and Healing*" - to tell her journey to over 50,000 cable subscribers.

"You own your story," she thought as she drove to the studio.

"I did this."

“Celebrated in her Image”



"It has been difficult speaking of her in the past tense, I swear I can still hear her voice," explained Social Worker Jackie Vidal when reminiscing about her dear friend and colleague, Yocasta DelRosario, a DCF Supervisor who passed away in July.

Jackie was recently named the recipient of the 1st annual Yocasta DelRosario Humanitarian Award. This award was created by social workers in the Waterbury regional DCF office, who were looking for a way to honor their colleague while healing their broken hearts.

Jackie was extremely emotional when sharing this high honor, explaining how touched she was to be considered in the image of someone whom she admired so much.

Jackie has been employed by DCF since 2015. Before DCF, she served as a Liaison, providing support to licensed foster and adoptive families through her work at the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families.

Often, through tears, Jackie explained Yocasta to be a bright light in the Waterbury DCF office, always making sure that her colleagues felt seen and heard. She had a way of making others feel safe and welcomed, going out of her way to check in on them.



Even families whose homes she would visit were left better than she found them. Yocasta established a trusting relationship and was genuine to her core. Happy, filled with joy and a ball of energy are just a few words of the many used to describe her.

Jackie who carries the nickname, “Mrs. Claus”, loves to coordinate holiday gift drives for families involved with DCF, spending the holiday season working closely with her colleagues, donors, and community members to bring holiday joy to children and their parents. Jackie was

honored with the Humanitarian Award by her colleagues because of her selfless efforts in the field of Child Welfare, and for her kindness, wisdom, and mutual respect for others – just a few of the characteristics used to describe Jackie’s work ethic and compassionate heart.

As shared by Maritza Acosta, Office Director in the Waterbury Regional Office, “Jackie was nominated and selected for this award due to her dedication, professionalism, eagerness to help her co-workers, and her ability to engage even the most difficult clients. She demonstrates a strong personal investment in her professional responsibilities and works tirelessly to ensure that the needs of the children, teens, parents and foster parents on her caseload are met. Jackie goes above and beyond her daily tasks and is always readily available to help make any situation better for families, whether on her own case or with one of her co-workers.”

Jackie is considered to be passionate, thoughtful, non-judgmental, empathetic, and respectful, a role model in her unwavering integrity in all areas of her work.

“Yocasta was simply, amazing,” explained Jackie, adding, “I just hope I can make her beautiful soul proud by carrying on her legacy.”

We believe that Jackie already has!

" I don't want to be anyone else."



An engaging and articulate Destiny Bromfield recently co-led the statewide Youth Advisory Board meeting. She had command of the group's attention made up of her peers in the care and custody of the Department, social workers, administrators, and Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.

During introductions, Destiny turned to Social Work Supervisor Brian Smith, and with three spoken words provided us a glimpse of the success a six-year relationship between a young woman and supervisor can lead to with patience, understanding and commitment.

"Thank you, Dad," she stated.

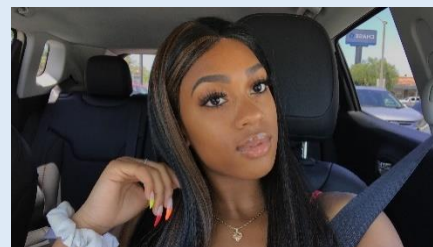
Destiny is now 21 years old, in college studying communication and professional writing, has an interest in graphic design and is content with life. "I don't want to be anyone else."

Today's Destiny evolved over time from the Destiny who first came to the Department's attention.

Born in the Bronx, New York Destiny arrived in Connecticut as a teenager with her family and quickly became involved with the Department. "I would automatically shut down," Destiny remembers when she first entered care and was "very blunt and very direct" about what she was feeling.

All around her, Destiny experienced frustration and sadness while not being able to manage her life. At times, she ran back to her family, only to return. "People misplaced my passion for aggression," she stated.

Destiny refers to Brian as "the steady" during this time. "He let me be that little angry teenager," Destiny stated. "We had our ups and downs. They knew I had more to offer."



Brian Smith has the highest regard for Destiny and her strength. "I have been the Social Work Supervisor assigned to Destiny's case since 2016," he stated. "It has been an absolute pleasure watching this young lady continue to fight through adversity and challenges to work toward her goal of being successful in life."

Destiny credits Brian who instilled a belief in her to be more "well-rounded" and to "channel emotions in a different way."

"He helped me grow and watched me grow," Destiny stated.



Social Worker Kim Soto also played a significant supporting role in Destiny's life prior to her retirement. "It did not feel like a business or their job to do. It felt more family oriented," is how Destiny described the relationship. That commitment has continued with current worker Laura Hudson.

"It truly sends chills down my spine when Destiny credits our team for her current success. Destiny has thanked us for not giving up on her and pushing her to reach her maximum potential," Brian stated.

Early childhood experiences and the insights Destiny learned during those formative years in DCF care put her in a position to assist others in a similar situation. When involved with the Supervised Apartment and Independent Living (SAIL) program, Destiny acted as an example of promise for other youth. "I had a leader, role model role to play," she recalls. "Advanced in adulting" was her mindset at the time. Her peers watched her closely.

Destiny would speak to fellow residents of the program. "DCF is here to help you," she would tell them. "Be able to take criticism and take control of your life."

"Know what you want."

Destiny is a firm believer of "moving on" and not living in history or allowing your past to define you. She has applied these concepts to her own family and the way she handles personal relationships. "Everything I got, I worked for," she stated. Her success has not been met with acceptance by some family members even to the extent of how they feel about the color of her skin.

Destiny is from Jamaica and having lighter skin almost makes one "famous" throughout the Jamaican community. Jealousy existed amongst particular family members who referred to her as a "white girl trapped in a black girl's body" or "whitewashed."

"I have learned to accept the things I can change and things I cannot change," was Destiny's response to this scrutiny.

"I don't want to be stuck in the same old place," she stated.



These same concepts also apply to how Destiny feels about her overall community. She is intent on pushing the message to respect their culture but not to get stuck in the wrongdoings of the past. "We are all human," she stated. "What else do you have to offer to yourself and those around you?"

Destiny Bromfield now has her own apartment. Here she can write, paint and blast music while hanging out with Tiglet her cat. She took an acting and modeling course and "met a beautiful group of people."

Destiny describes herself as a "certified job hopper" as her work ethic began early in her life. "I built doorbells," Destiny stated was one of her early jobs. She has made bags for Stop&Shop, Walmart and Barnes and Noble.

"I don't want to be anyone else," she stated. "This is where I wanted to be and to show DCF I can do this on my own."

What is the overall message she has for DCF staff? "You are raising these kids. They are almost a reflection of you," she stated. Think of everything you say and do.

Destiny refers to Brian Smith, her constant over the years, as "my backbone."



"He is my outside looking into myself. He is me looking at me."