

**"I have a picture of how I want to be."**



It was a busy Friday afternoon for Kelsey Murphy. Between leaving work to pick up 7-year-old Eli, going to the bank, dropping off clothes at the laundromat and driving to 3-year-old Gio's daycare, she shared critical points of her life's journey - ones both difficult and extraordinarily successful.

We all face challenges. Kelsey's substance use began in high school with her first experience with heroin. After Eli was born, she was introduced to cocaine. What followed was involvement with the Department of Children and Families.

Kelsey admits at that point in her life she was "not 100% ready" to commit to working on herself or to put in the effort to develop tools to gain sobriety. The relationship established with her DCF worker was not positive and eventually, she lost custody of Eli to his father. "It was not a good outcome," Kelsey recalled.

Describing herself as "very bad at the time" Kelsey found herself years later pregnant, and suffering from polysubstance use including heroin, cocaine and now fentanyl - the highly potent and life-threatening drug that has claimed thousands of lives across the country. She checked herself into the Wellmore Women and Children's program in Waterbury, an intermediate treatment program for pregnant or parenting women with a young child. Kelsey gave birth to Gio two months later and was given permission for him to live with her at the program.

DCF again became involved.

Gio did not sleep, wanted Kelsey to constantly carry him and facility staff were limited in how they could support her given programmatic issues. "He wanted me to hold him all the time and not put him down," Kelsey stated. Allegations of co-sleeping surfaced and Kelsey's overall compliance with Wellmore was in question.

A week before Kelsey's scheduled discharge, Gio was separated from her and placed into kinship care. "Oh God," Kelsey thought. For the second time, she lost custody of her child. Although Gio was eventually placed with his Maternal Grandmother, the pain of removal was palpable. "That was hard," she stated.

Kelsey admits she was "stuck in my ways. Rude. Ignorant." Having already lost one child, would the trajectory for Gio be the same?

This time was different - Kelsey met Social Worker Bryonna Geiste from the Waterbury Regional Office.



"She never gave up on me," is how Kesley describes the relationship that developed. "I trusted her and knew she wanted what was best for Gio." Kesley allowed herself to be vulnerable, gave input on her course of treatment, disclosed to Bryonna an unhealthy relationship she was experiencing with her son's father and adamantly confirmed her sobriety while yearning for Gio to come home.

"I always wanted to do better," Kelsey stated. She and Bryonna made a great team.

Kesley began working hard on herself. Attending the Root Center in Hartford, she completed multiple agency programs ranging from Intensive Out-Patient to Relapse Prevention. Her work continued with Community Health Resources and 12 hours of parenting education through Community Residence Inc.

Through the Connection's Supportive Housing for Families Program, Kesley obtained a two-bedroom apartment in Enfield - the first time she ever had her own place to live. It also presented challenges as Enfield was out of the Waterbury Office catchment area, traditionally requiring a case transfer, which could have potentially ended Bryonna supporting her.



When the thought of a new worker was presented, Kelsey "refused anyone else" and given their "great connection" an exception was made for the relationship to continue.

"Working with Kelsey has been a pleasure but that is not to say we didn't have our challenges in the beginning," Bryonna stated. "Open lines of communication, clear expectations, and mutual respect were paramount to building a successful partnership."

Kelsey and Gio completed a Reunification Readiness Assessment with the Village for Children and Families. The outcome of the work was all positive and the assessment recommended reunification.

There was one last hurdle to climb - a family team meeting held virtually to gain insights from Kelsey's entire team of support. In attendance were her clinician, staff from The Village, Gio's kinship provider, who was also her maternal grandmother, and Gio's Attorney, the group talked openly about the future.

"I just knew if I stayed clean, eventually the truth would come out," she stated.

The decision - Reunification.

On 6/27/23, Gio came home! This will be the first time that he spends his birthday and Christmas with his mother.

"I will never lose him again," she stated.

Throughout this difficult journey, Kelsey remained a constant in the life of Eli who remains under his father's care. She has plans to apply to have her guardianship reinstated to him, once the DCF case is closed.

Eli is a delightful little boy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Kelsey has made extensive efforts to help Eli understand the circumstances under which he lives with his father, DCF involvement and why - during periods of his young life - she was not around as much as she wanted.

"Fantastic" is how Eli describes spending time with his mother and little brother as they watch movies and go to the park as a family. The boys' bedroom is furnished with bunk beds and their own television.

Eli plays football and Ja'Marr Chase of the Cincinnati Bengals is his favorite athlete.

"I think my boots are still covered in mud," Kelsey stated from the time she ran onto the field with Eli and other parents at the start of his Homecoming team's game. With Gio in her arms and Eli on her side, they all ran under a balloon filled overpass in the rain.

Would Kelsey have imagined this would be her life three years earlier? Is she satisfied? Does she feel accomplished as a parent? "I need to do better," Kelsey stated.

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"I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to witness Kelsey's confidence and trust in herself and as a parent grow exponentially over the years," Bryonna added. "I couldn't be happier to see Gio achieve permanency in time for the holidays."



What is Kelsey's message for others involved with the Department of Children and Families? "Keep sticking with it," she stated. "Be honest." While families may be concerned about the potential for their children to be removed, she thinks families need to focus on the "issues which brought you to this point in your life" and work on yourself.

Ultimately the families decide their path and the outcome.

On overcoming addiction, she has equally helpful words. "You have to be ready for yourself, not just for the kids," she stated.

Ultimately, her actions exemplify the concept of "radical acceptance" she learned through Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Pain is a part of life and radical acceptance allows us to keep that pain from becoming suffering. "I accept the things I can and cannot change," Kelsey stated.

"Over the past three years, I have learned as much as I can to be a better person," she stated. One key piece of insight Kelsey now has is to ensure she takes care of herself first. Kelsey has

learned from her "mistakes" and saw the intergenerational pattern in her own family of others neglecting their physical and mental health at the expense of others.

"You can't fill their cup from an empty cup," Kesley stated in relation to what her children need.

Let us all celebrate Gio being home for the holidays and Eli experiencing his little brother's joy during Christmas.

Our holiday wish for Kelsey is for her to pause for a few moments, look at her family and know she has changed her life - and the lives of two little boys - who will someday understand the strength and resilience of the woman they call "Mom".