

"Mommy and Daddy are sending their love."



"I have an idea for you, what about foster care?" For Michelle Gonzalez, she probably never imagined her former boss would encourage her to open her home to children in need. Yet, he saw something in Michelle which is undeniable - she has a gift for caring for others.

As time went by, his questioning continued. "Okay Michelle, what do you think?" Michelle talked to her family - who she refers to as her "biggest support" - and all agreed for her to become licensed. "I am going to make a difference," she remembers thinking.

Over the past 7 years, Michelle has developed a relationship with each family of the children placed into her home. "I make it known from the first icebreaker that I am not here to replace them," is how Michelle wants the family to understand her role.

"I put myself in their shoes. This could happen to anyone any day. What would I want? I would want to know who my child is with and have that relationship," she added.

In fact, it is Michelle's entire family, her mother, three adult children, three grandchildren and her young, adopted son, who embrace the children placed with her. "Any child that comes through the door is treated like a sibling," Michelle explained. This includes her children rocking to sleep a child in distress or simply being patient when Michelle is going to numerous medical appointments or other meetings on behalf of the children needing her attention.

"They are wonderful."

Every Sunday, the family gets together for a family dinner. The invites are also extended to the birth families.

Michelle's role in serving others started when she was a Family Advocate with a Head Start program providing supports to up to 40 families at a time. It was clear she would do literally anything to assist - even showing up at a family's home with a mop and vacuum - to aid in cleaning up the house. "Let's do this together," she would say.

"I want them to know I'm there for them."

The families responded and as their trust in Michelle grew, so did the phone calls at all hours of the night. "I just need someone to listen to me," is what one parent said to her during a 10:00 p.m. outreach.





Michelle is currently a liaison for the pediatric and neonatal intensive care units at Danbury Hospital. She connects families to services and has vast experience working with DCF staff. Supporting families with high-risk newborns is everyday part of her job. It is easy to understand why DCF quickly moved to place infants in her home.

One could say she cares for babies day and night.....

Michelle has had a total of 5 placements which includes one baby currently in her care. One child left her home to be placed with a kinship family and they still Facetime, recently making plans to visit a farm together. Michelle exchanges pictures with the grandparents caring for another little boy whom she previously provided care.

Michelle has also adopted a little boy who is now 4 years of age. The parents voluntarily terminated their rights with the mother stating in court, "As long as you can guarantee Michelle can stay with him, I will sign." This an open adoption with consistent communication still occurring with his birth family. "They gave me one of the best things. To trust me to raise their child," is how Michelle views her son's birth family.

For one special little boy, Jackson, and his mother, Amy, Michelle was the guiding force that led to their reunification. It is probably the best of example of how a team of a foster parent and birth parent working together is clearly in a child's best interests.

For three years, Jackson was placed with Michelle during the COVID-19 pandemic which presented many barriers to permanency. Amy was incarcerated at the time of her son's birth and suffered from years of a substance abuse disorder. "She never looked down on me for my past," is how Amy describes Michelle's relationship with her.

Amy was a consistent visitor to Michelle's home. "I guess you could say I was family from day one," Amy stated as she was invited to picnics, dinners, and holiday events. "They are my family."



Shortly after Jackson was reunified, Amy relapsed, and Jackson was again placed with Michelle. "You are not going to fail this," Michelle told Amy.

Michelle took two weeks off from work, drove Amy to her appointments and continued to tell her, "You are going to get Jackson back."

"I wanted to make sure she was good."

Michelle advocated for Amy with DCF. "I want a voice with DCF," Michelle stated. Parents need to feel that support.

"I couldn't be prouder of her," is how Michelle describes Amy now that Jackson has once again been reunified.

Read more about Amy's story and her relationship with Michelle in the story entitled, "I can be Mama, you can be Mommy."

Throughout her journey in foster care, Michelle credits the "humungous support" and relationship she has with Robyn Wood of the Foster Care Division. "Any hour day or night she makes sure she reaches out and gets back to you," Michelle stated. After one emotionally difficult reunification, it was Robyn who encouraged Michelle to continue fostering.

"This is your calling. This is what you are meant to do," Robyn told her. No truer words.



"You would be surprised about all the avenues DCF can help you reach," she wants birth families to know.

What is Michelle's message to other foster parents?

"Keep an open mind and do not judge," she stated. "The family needs you. That child needs you."

"What is healthiest for that child is to have interactions with their birth parents. They need to know their family still loves them," Michelle emphatically stated.

For any child placed into her home, Michelle delivers a special message as she is putting them to sleep. "Mommy and Daddy are sending their love," she tells them and gives them an extra hug.

Thank you, Michelle, on behalf of those little children, who cannot yet voice their gratitude to you, for all you have done for them and their families!

The names of the birth mother and child have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.