



**This month's edition of the Spotlight is dedicated solely to
Connecticut's Adoption Day 2023*

Our sincere gratitude to the Judicial Branch, especially the Judges in the Superior Courts for Juvenile Matters, who opened their courtrooms to our media partners across the state.

(Leslie Gomez)

Every child deserves the stability of a permanent home. Adoption is one special way that a family is formed.

November is celebrated as **National Adoption Month!** Look at the beautiful smiles of families ... Pure JOY.

With over 30 adoptions finalized on Friday November 17th, DCF will have completed more than 420 adoptions this calendar year 2023, in addition to reunifying almost 400 children and facilitating over 280 children achieving permanency through transfer of guardianship.

Thank you to **Governor Lamont** for remarks at an adoption hearing in New Haven. The Governor recalled how his own family history involves facilitating adoptions-- reflecting pride as a topic near and dear, "To Serenity and your sister, you've got a nice home... We love you," he told the family of two little girls whose bond had just been legally cemented.

Myrlande Alexis of Stratford said that she felt called to open her home to children in need. "Can you adopt me?" asked one special young lady, Jiji, during an emotional family meeting. The answer was "Yes" and a few years later, this 16-year-old became one of 46 teens adopted across the state this year. Read their story and hear about the special adoption day celebration!

"Beautifully real and perfect for each other" is the story of two brothers adopted by a woman from Maryland after being featured in the DCF Heart Gallery. Isaiah and Eli now have a permanent home - while maintaining contact with their birth family. "Go into this process for you and know that you're going to change a life and it's going to be beautiful," stated **Jenn Tripp** about her adoption journey.





Kataryna and Zoey are siblings adopted at different times by **Susan Poswinski** and **Prashanth Nallainathan**. As Susan spoke with emotion of fostering this sibling connection, she shared openly about the grief, sadness, and trauma experienced by birth parents. She stated, "Nobody wants to give up their child, and we know that." With a courtroom full of reporters, DCF staff and family members, legal permanency was finalized for Kataryna. "This is probably our favorite day of the whole court calendar year," said Juvenile Matters **Judge Bernadette Conway**. Watch the family here: [30 children adopted at Connecticut's Adoption Day](#)

Listen to New Haven SWS **Rodney Moore** and his family describe the adoption process leading up to two-year-old Ju Ju's legal permanency in **Judge Sharon Skyers'** courtroom. Rodney's professional role brings a unique perspective to the work as now a kinship adoptive parent: [A Connecticut Family's Joy of Adoption](#)



"Best day ever," is how **Jessica Villanueva** described adoption day with her son, 6-month-old Jeziah. After being exposed to multiple substances in utero, Jeziah needed all the constant love, affection and attention Jessica and community partners could offer. See Jeziah now as he took part in his special day: [Baby welcomed into family during National Adoption Month](#)

Jessica Urban officially adopted 13-year-old Autumn and for **Judge Jason Lobo**, it was a great day in his courtroom. "I think it's really a big stereotype, that teenage children are going to have behavioral issues," Jessica stated while emphasizing the need to continue promoting adoption for children all ages: [All smiles in court at New Harford mother adopts teenage girl on CT Adoption Day](#)



Biological brothers Kol and Jaxon will grow up the rest of their life together after being formally adopted by **Andis and Bayla Arietta** during a ceremony in Middletown. "These boys love each other so much. The first person they want to see in the morning is each other," said Andis. See more of this family here: [Brothers adopted together during National Adoption Month](#)

KUDOS also to the DCF Staff, Assistant Attorneys General, court personnel, attorneys for the minor children, CAFAF liaisons, service providers and community collaborators who have all worked tirelessly to support families we collectively serve.

Ongoing support is available for families after adoption, or guardianship is transferred. The **UCONN Health Adoption Assistance Program (AAP)** provides post-adoption support, including assessment, education, brief counseling, and referral services to adoptive families and to families formed through guardianship. Information about AAP can be obtained by visiting the Adoption Assistance Program website, by calling **(877) 679-1961** or by e-mail at **aap@uchc.edu**



Children with complex needs, sibling groups, and teens or young people identifying as LGBTQIA+, continue to be targeted groups requiring special attention to find permanent homes. For more information go to **CTFosters.com** or call **1-888-KID-HERO** & **KidHero@cafafct.org**

“Living the Good Life”



In the spirit of the old African proverb declaring, "It takes a village to raise a child," Myrlande Alexis embodies the profound truth in this saying.

This timeless adage underscores the belief that a community's collective involvement is indispensable when nurturing and guiding a child to flourish in a supportive environment.

While residing in Haiti, Myrlande's compassionate spirit and tender heart have guided her to embrace the roles of foster parent and adoptive guardian since her late teens.

She then moved to the United States, where Myrlande's extraordinary commitment continued as she attended nursing school and raised a biological daughter and her godchild. Inspired by her mom, who embraces every child like a grandmother, Myrlande found herself contemplating fostering after she survived breast cancer, a divorce, and her children leaving for college, leaving her with an empty nest.

Myrlande reflected on a conversation she had with her daughter, who was in college at the time. "You'd be great, Mom," her daughter said, adding, "You have so much love to share," Myrlande called to inquire about fostering the next day and attended an informational session. She has been fostering medically complex children for the past six years, adopting a child through foster care in 2020.

Her dedication has left an unforgettable mark on the lives of numerous medically complex children she has fostered and adopted. Myrlande's unwavering commitment became even more profound when her story intertwined with Jiji, a medically complex child who was 12 years old at the time of placement.



Myrlande shared that Jiji tested her commitment by presenting various behavioral challenges. Throughout this journey, trust formed in multiple stages, with the first significant step occurring when Jiji was asked to address Myrlande as "Tati" and later progressed to "Mommy." This evolution speaks to the resilience of their bond and highlights the depth of trust and connection that developed between Myrlande and Jiji over time.

Myrlande fondly recalls an emotional moment during a home visit with Jiji's social worker. Seated together at the dining room table, Jiji, now thirteen years old, looked at Myrlande and asked if she would adopt her. She then turned to Alexis' biological daughter and asked: "Can your mom please adopt me?" This profoundly emotional moment resonates vividly in Myrlande's memory, emphasizing the certainty and heartfelt desire Jiji expressed in wanting to become a cherished part of Myrlande's family.



The significance of this request further solidifies the profound connection and sense of belonging that has blossomed between them. The adoption process took three years due to immigration laws and requirements.

Jiji's social worker, Ludy Mingot-Cesar, expresses gratitude to the exceptional team at the Bridgeport DCF office for their support and collaborative efforts with Jiji's medical team at Yale Smilow and the Alexis family. This collaboration resulted in a remarkable outcome for this young lady.

Jiji's family shares her culture and language. "She found a home with a family that was simply made for her," Ludy said. "Jiji is now healthy, she has a great family that loves her, advocates for her and are dedicated to providing her with a forever home."

On October 31, 2023, Jiji was adopted. "It felt amazing," Jiji said, explaining, "I've been waiting a very long time, and it finally happened; now, I'm living the good life!"

Myrlande takes great pride in Jiji, a remarkable 10th-grade student with aspirations to become a pediatrician. Jiji excels at the honors level and is not only a talented hip-hop and ballet dancer but also a guitar player with a passion for drawing.



Expressing admiration for Jiji's accomplishments, Social Worker Mingot-Cesar stated, "I have never felt prouder witnessing this young lady overcome significant adversity, including neglect, life-threatening illness, and abandonment."

Myrlande emphasized her commitment to instilling the belief in all her children that they can achieve anything they set their minds to, fostering an environment where there are no limits to what they can accomplish.

"Family is the most important thing in life," stated Myrlande. This resonates as a guiding principle in her actions, affirming that she lives each day in a way that reflects this profound truth.

She Just Wanted To Be Loved And A Safe Place To Be



As the sun set on November 17th, over 30 families went home a little bit bigger as dozens of adoptions were finalized in courtrooms across the state. As of this calendar year, DCF has completed more than 420 adoptions adding to the 7,100 children who have reached permanency under Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes' leadership, including nearly 2,300 adoptions since 2019.

While impressive, these numbers do not do justice to the family stories cumulating on Connecticut Adoption Day and the thousands of adoptions prior to that day. Stories both heartwarming and of heartbreak - babies born addicted to drugs or of teens anxiously waiting for their forever home.

But also, stories of joy, acceptance, and love. Stories of teens being welcomed with open arms by their adoptive siblings. Or biological sisters reunited because adoptive parents had room in their hearts and home for one more addition to the family.

Kataryna

While family reunification is not always possible for many reasons, the former was the case for 10-month-old Kataryna who is medically complex due to premature birth and exposure to substances during pregnancy. In 2021, the day after Thanksgiving, and after overcoming several COVID-related obstacles, New Haven couple Susan Poswinski and Prasthanth Nallainathan adopted Kataryna's biological sister Zoey after their mother walked away from the hospital just days after her birth.

Susan and Prasthanth found their adoption of Zoey to be such a rewarding experience that they were contemplating adopting or fostering again. Initially, the couple was not planning to adopt another newborn because they are in their forties and preferred an older youth.

Fast forward to 2023, the couple got a call from DCF asking if they were interested in fostering or adopting Zoey's newborn sister Kataryna. After some discussions, they agreed so the sisters could be together.

On Connecticut Adoption Day, Susan and Prasthanth made it official by adopting Kataryna almost two years to the day of welcoming her sister into the family. Despite all she had been through as an infant, the couple was delighted to find that Kataryna was a very smiley, engaging, and happy baby just like her big sister.

"We knew Zoey was not the first of the biological parents so we knew there would be a chance there would be other children," said Susan. "Prasthanth and I talked about it and, ironically, we

got the call from DCF because we have Zoey and DCF first and foremost wants to keep the siblings together."

Both siblings were born premature and addicted to drugs; something Susan is very open about because she wants other prospective adoptive and foster parents to know that children are resilient. Placed in the right environment, they can come out of dire situations if they are given the love and the care they require.

While the sisters came to the home with challenges, Susan said it was worth it, "we're the blessed ones."



Susan and Prasthant had to change their license to medically complex and get special training. The couple also works from home, so they are able to keep Kataryna out of daycare and commit to birth-to-three.

Ultimately, all families want their children to have the best advantages. For Susan and Prasthant it was no different. Getting up to speed with the help of occupational therapy and birth-to-three system supports, Susan said, interacting with the girls, you would never be able to tell the conditions into which they were born.

"It was a lot of work obviously, but parenting is a lot of work. Keeping up with your family is a lot of work in general. The outcome of all this was just amazing for us."

Autumn

In addition to keeping siblings like Zoey and Kataryna together, national and state child well-being jurisdictions have focused their efforts on adoption and permanency for teens before they age out of care and custody.

According to the U.S. Children's Bureau, more than one in five children waiting for adoption are aged 13-17. Of the nearly 2,300 Connecticut adoptions that have taken place since 2019, only 241 have been adoptions of teenagers aged 13-17. A reason for the low rate of teen adoptions may be apprehension on behalf of potential adoptive parents worried about the assumed "baggage" that age group may bring to the home.

Jessica Urban Jack of New Hartford had those same concerns when she was asked to provide respite care for 13-year-old Autumn. However, as soon as Autumn entered the home Jessica's three other children took to her very quickly - a factor that helped Jessica decide to make Autumn a permanent member of the family.

For Jessica's oldest daughter Emma, having Autumn in the house was like having a friend over. Long before Autumn's official adoption proceedings Emma, who is also an adoptive child to Jessica, was referring to Autumn as her sister. Jessica said all of those factors made the decision to eventually adopt Autumn "very easy."

"We just developed a great relationship so when Autumn needed a new home it was just a very easy decision for us [to adopt]," Jessica said.



Due to intimate partner violence involving her biological mother, Autumn came to the home with understandable trauma for which she has an Individualized Educational Plan and other clinical needs. As an APRN, Jessica was well-prepared to help support Autumn. Beyond that, Jessica has enjoyed coaching Autumn's soccer team and was a troop leader for Autumn's Girl Scouts.

"Autumn came into our lives and she was older than our kids," Jessica recalled. "Initially I was concerned with [fostering or adopting] an older kid because, especially with domestic violence, you're afraid they may mirror the behavior they've been exposed to - but Autumn is exactly the opposite."

This is Jessica's second adoption, and she loves having a house full of kids. Jessica said she always wanted a big family but it "just wasn't in the cards for me."

Her first adoptive child Emma, like Autumn, was fostering in the home and, like Autumn, fit right in with the rest of the family. Jessica adopted Emma partly because she wanted her oldest daughter to have a sibling close in age.

"That was really, really important to me which is why I chose the adoption route. And then I just found it extremely rewarding so wanted to continue to help foster older youth."

When Jessica's grandmother passed away, she left a letter for Jessica's family revealing that she had fostered and adopted a number of youth - Jessica was unaware up until that point. The letter stated: 'Just when I thought I couldn't love someone anymore another child would come into my life and my cup would runneth over.' Jessica feels the exact same way.

Jessica stays in contact with members of Autumn's biological family who remain a part of Autumn's life and were present at the adoption hearing. Jessica has a good relationship with

Autumn's aunt and cousin and says you cannot ignore your familial roots because "those roots are always going to be a piece of who you are as a person."

Jessica's advice for others who may be interested in fostering or adopting but are hesitant about bringing an older youth into their home?

"Every age has its own challenges, but I found that, with older kids, they are able to communicate their needs so much better than a younger child. I've fostered a 15-month-old who was withdrawn, and it was difficult because she just couldn't tell me what she needed."

"But with Autumn, you can really develop a unique relationship with a teenager that you can't always necessarily have with a younger child. And it makes it much easier to help them with that transition."

After all, like younger youth in care and custody, teens are just big kids in need of a loving forever home too. And just like any other kid Autumn loves sports, dance and playing flute in school band at Northwest Regional.

"Most teens [in Autumn's situation] are just scared and they just want a home. They're so loving, and Autumn was that way - she just wanted to be loved and a safe place to be."



Jessica, Autumn and family pose with Judge Jason Lobo on CT Adoption Day.

Beautifully real and perfect for each other



Jen Tripp was in the 2nd grade when the show *Unsolved Mysteries* played an episode about a man looking for his long-lost little sister. They had been separated decades prior when a family adopted the infant girl and left the brother in foster care. The heartbreak from severed family bonds in this story particularly struck Jen as she is a little sister who even to this day, adores her big brother. Jen recalls how impactful this story was, imagining what her life could have looked like had she been that little girl. "I cannot imagine my life without him in it. It was at this pivotal moment in my childhood, nearly thirty years ago, that I made the decision I was going to adopt a sibling set," she stated.

Flash forward to March of 2021. After settling down in Maryland and taking some time to adjust and find stability in her new job, Jen began her adoption journey with an initial training followed by a home study. In December of 2021, she really began looking into potential sibling sets within foster care once the licensing process was finalized. Jen's organization and drive kept her grounded in this lengthy process. "My agency told me you want to inquire about 10 families a week," Jen stated, "so I made a whole spreadsheet of children I was interested in."

On a crisp January evening, Jen came across the [Connecticut State Department of Children and Families Adoption webpage](#) and [The Heart Gallery](#); which features profiles of youth who are currently living in foster care. At this point, she already had compiled multiple spreadsheets of research and inquired about forty sibling sets. She distinctly remembers reading Isaiah and Eli's profiles on The Heart Gallery. "I thought their profiles captured such key aspects of their identity, their spirit, their cleverness and curiosity, their quirkiness; especially for Eli..." Jen stated. "But I also really saw this caring connection between two brothers, the affection they have for each other."

The boys' social worker, Brittney Kilfeather, reflected upon creating this posting with the boys noting that their photograph was the two of them hugging. When asked about the process of making the posting with Brittney, Isaiah recalls how being placed without his brother Eli was the only 'dealbreaker' for him in addition to staying connected to family.



Getting adopted with a sibling, and as an older youth, can be difficult. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau notes that as of September 30, 2021, there were 114,000 children and youth waiting to be adopted who were at risk of aging out of foster care without permanent family connections. In addition to that astronomical number, more than one

in five children waiting for adoption are aged 13-17 and the average age of all children waiting to be adopted was 7.5 years old.¹

Despite the odds stack against them, Jen moved the boys to the top of her spreadsheet and inquired immediately. Then she had to wait and sit with the anxiety in the unknown..."The choice was out of my hands," stated Jen. "I needed their team to make the choice on who would now be best to adopt the boys. Would they approve me?"

It wasn't until March of 2022 that DCF decided to move forward with Jen. It was around this time that Jen also began working with Brittney to learn how she could best prepare for the boys. "If you could clone Brittney, we would fix all the problems going on. She made the whole process super easy. What really stood out to me was transparency," Jen stated about her relationship with Brittney. Brittney facilitated their initial meetings with the boys' foster parents and asked direct questions so that Jen could fully understand their situation, background, and needs. Jen feels this transparency allowed her to fully prepare and ultimately made their placement into a smooth transition.



But approval did not just stop at the boys' team, Jen also needed to gain the boys' approval. From the moment Eli learned about Jen, he was apparently ready to move in with her. On the other hand, Isaiah, both older and wiser, was hesitant. He had already been aware of the disruptive nature of past placements.



Jen found meeting them initially on Zoom to be difficult, for many of the same reasons we've experienced during the pandemic - long periods of silence while waiting for the internet to buffer, youth's attention span is harder to gain after so much screen time, and it's simply just harder to feel that in person connection. "Brittney was also paramount in helping with our visits," recalled Jen, which began around June of 2022. "We did two visits a month and she would bring the boys down here to Baltimore once a month and I would drive up there to Connecticut."

During their second in person meeting, any anxiety leftover from their initial Zoom meetings dissipated and everything changed. "I drove up to Connecticut," Jen stated. "We spent the day

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. "National Adoption Month 2023: Outreach Toolkit." *Child Welfare Information Gateway*, www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/nam-outreach-toolkit.pdf.

together and ended the evening at a trampoline park. We were all bouncing together when Isaiah turned to me and said, '*Jen, look at me.*' I did. In that moment, there were no more doubts for me." Jen could feel that Isaiah was opening up and that he was ready to give her a new chance as his forever mom.

Both boys were ready to give it a go.



Then, they all had to wait for their placement date which would end up being January 7th, 2023. During this waiting period, Jen focused on preparing for the boys by learning as much about their past as possible so she could continue to nourish connections to their roots while she built new connections and opportunities for the boys. "The other side they don't talk about is how the support of the adoptees' care team makes all the difference," Jen notes while reflecting upon the significance of nourishing connections. She met with their social worker, grandmother, and foster mother. She went to school and

interdisciplinary meetings. Jen even spoke with their therapists and their psychiatrist to help better understand their needs.

"I learned more and more about them and what to expect. It did not scare me to know what their needs would be," Jen stated. "It empowered me. I knew what I was getting into. I had months and months to prepare. The transparency of the team allowed me to be ready for the reality of becoming a parent overnight."

In addition to her own preparations, Jen found it key to figure out how she could make the boys feel comfortable in a new home. She ended up moving locally and purchased a new home before their placement, including them in every step of the way to empower them in the process of making a new home together. They were able to tour the home before Jen bought it, they picked out their own rooms, chose their room colors, beds, and furniture. Jen's deliberate decision to include Eli and Isaiah in making decisions on their new home allowed them agency in this transition. The boys were grateful for this inclusion, Eli noted how "it just made everything feel right."





Finally, after almost two years of research, training, meetings, and preparations the anticipated wait was over! The boys moved in, and the adoption was official on August 18th, 2023.

Jen continues to learn their interests and finds joy in nourishing the boys during this phase of identity development - a big reason why she was excited to adopt teens.

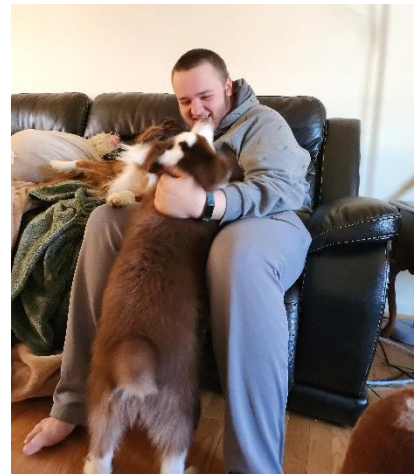
"There is something really special about the adolescent phase," she stated. "The core job of a teenager is self-identity to be a part of that journey is something I'm so happy and so proud to get to be a part of - to be able to create a safe space for them to figure out who they are, especially in the context of everything that they've gone

through in the past."

As a single mom, Jen also notes how the independence of teens is another perk for adopting older youth. "Isaiah is already driving me around," Jen exclaimed with a smile. "He does an excellent job and was really responsible from the get-go." In addition to Isaiah's help with driving, the boys function as a team. They're great at taking care of and supporting one another because they are so bonded. If Jen is still at work and Isaiah gets home first, he will take care of Eli making sure the house runs on the same schedule.

When asked what his favorite thing is about his adoptive Mom, Eli reflects upon how he loves watching *Dr. Who* and having movie night with his forever family (both dogs included). Isaiah notes how appreciative he is of Jen's priority to embrace his friendships by always leaving time to see friends during family visits. Jen even hosted family and friends for his birthday last year. "I firmly believe that the more family that we have the better," stated Jen.

"It was absolutely important for me to maintain connection and what I told their biological family from the get-go is my job was not to replace anybody. My role is to add, not to take away. Maintaining those family connections has been very important to me."





When asked what she wishes other prospective adoptive parents could know, Jen wrapped up the interview with candid reflections upon how despite their many successes, they are not perfect. "From the moment they moved in, they threw my life into chaos," says Jen. "I've never in my life been more tired, but I've also never been more content and more happy. I can't imagine my home without them in it. Go into this process for you and know that you're going to change a life and it's going to be beautiful."

While they may not be perfect, the Tripp family are beautifully real and perfect for each other.