

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 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.