

A note to my 22-year-old self...



As you contemplate leaving your first “big girl” job as Social Services Director for your church’s 110-unit elderly housing complex, know that the sage wisdom of the elders you meet there will stay with you throughout this journey.

You will listen intently as a guest speaker in one of your last psychology elective courses talks about the **CT Dept of Children and Youth Services**. The guest, who referred to herself as **Patti**, explains what Social Work is and what Social Workers DO at DCYS. You will feel the urge to want to learn more about that.

There is no such thing as a chance encounter Ness... Pay attention to every person you meet.

You cross paths with this Patti again as she leads the interview when you go to apply for a job with that Dept. That very kind woman makes you even more confident that this is something for you to explore.

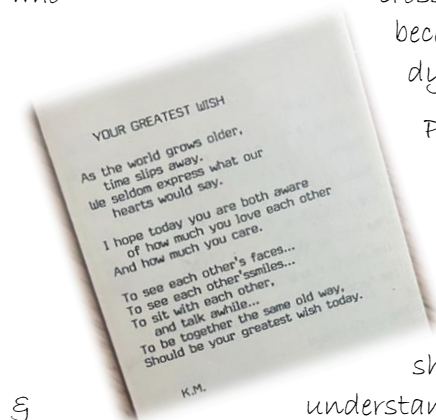
Patti would become your first supervisor and her kindness will be matched with a stern expectation that all of us — treat families with respect, dignity and to leave them better off than the crisis that brought them to our attention.



You will be hired just after the Department had been sued and at 22 years old, someone thinks you can help — I know it sounds crazy but trust me...it strangely works out!

Although you don’t know it yet - that Patti person will leave an impression on EVERY person who

crosses through the Waterbury office doors— These are people you become connected to as **FAMILY**. (You & K Bosley will be a dynamic duo like no other!)



Patti would see something in you back then and will write in your first evaluation.... She will refer to you as:

UNFAILINGLY COOPERATIVE AND WELL SUITED FOR PROTECTIVE SERVICE WORK.

&

Baby social worker Vanessa — listen and watch ... The children and families you are assigned will need you to show-up for them. **KM** will teach you the importance of kinship understanding young people who identify as **lgbtqia+** & **Little Mr. Prince** will make sure you pay attention to peanut allergies!

During your first year working there you will marry your soulmate-- who you meet in driving school ... Yup ... he’s kept your motor running ever since 😊...



You will become a Husky & earn a master's degree. Your mom, who will always be your **biggest** cheerleader will not be happy that you skip your MSW graduation.

Karma taps you -- twice as commencement keynote for the **UConn School of Social Work** (... always listen to your momma!)

During both of those graduations you get to have a front row seat as several DCF staff and many of your former students earn THEIR advanced degrees...

By students — I should tell you that for 15 years you followed in your mom's footsteps in the front of a classroom. You will teach 7 different elective & core social work courses! That Patti—has become way more than your boss... She is with you teaching at Central too (not by coincidence— as another means of support).

You beam with pride as your career grows and you cross paths with many of these students along the way. You learn just as much from them as you would teach them. They will in turn make their mark on the lives of children, families & systems.

That career path, Vanessa will have you meet and work alongside some of **the most selfless people making incredible sacrifices** on behalf of CT's children...

Speaking of kids, your social work tendencies show up as you and your soulmate volunteer for over a decade in your community. You will find yourself coaching and judging cheerleading (pay attention as cheer becomes an important social work metaphor & touch point for more close connections) You eventually formalize that commitment to serve by **LINK'ing** arms with some amazing civic-minded women and pledge service to all mankind in the illustrious sisterhood of **Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.**



Your own family will also grow to include two of the most awesome daughters you could ever imagine - they remind you of yourself and your sister in similar yet different nuances. And the twins will grow up to graduate college on the **SAME** day in two different states!

How'd you make **that** work? This job makes everyone associated with it incredible problem solvers...



That problem solving would take you from Waterbury to Torrington (watch out for the moose and tons of snow as you will lead in the 44 towns of Connecticut's northwest region)

Vanessa, you will see DCF change and adapt to the changing needs of society alongside more and more amazing people enriching the lives of others who just need someone to believe

in them. **THERE WILL BE TOUGH TIMES** -- SEPARATIONS ARE THE HARDEST -- Separating people who are not quite cut out for this work and **family separation** -- **ALWAYS HARD** -- always consequences. You will do so with the greatest of care.



In 2019, you will get the shock of your life when CT's governor would tap YOU to be DCF's Commissioner-- You will be incredibly nervous -- He WILL support you unconditionally and relentlessly Vanessa in one of the hardest jobs in state government-- as it should be.

You will become DCF's first Black Commissioner as your Governor understands that representation matters, and diversity of perspective is imperative because you and **ONE** DCF are serving **ALL HUMANS** in our state ... (⊗ an occasional 4-legged resident!)

That soulmate of yours will regularly remind you EVERY moment of your life has prepared you for this Herculean task you've taken on (... incidentally, **not one** of those moments prepared you to lead over 3000 people through a global pandemic!)



During those 5 years you will have to combine everything you've learned, taught, saw, imagined, or assessed with the most fearless Executive Team that had your back (and your FRONT) from day 1. You will be appreciative of Senior Administrators and managers across DCF (many of whom you've watched grow into absolutely incredible servant leaders!) These people not only survive this perilous time--DCF will **rise to the occasion** --time and time and time again despite the complexities families are facing -- The staff members you lead understand their assignments and execute it very well.

DCF will actually exit the expectations of that lawsuit you were hired as a result of --a consent decree after 3 decades and will emerge **stronger than ever** because of the relationships built along the way. You will rely on creative co-commissioners within HHS and beyond, and with many many partners across the legislative and judicial branches.... You will have your voice heard from the Nutmeg state to the **White House**-- and across national media... Sharing the Connecticut way.

Vanessa, you have learned that DCF does nothing alone and with help of law enforcement, education & healthcare professionals, and some of the **strongest** provider agencies in the country-- who all evolve together to meet the needs of families.

Vanessa listen, as parents will tell you (sometimes through their hurt & pain) how to meet their needs). Continue listening **closest** to the young people as they launch from foster care, their unabashed truth is **REAL TALK**. You will push to do right by them.



You will develop relationships with media partners who will report on how hard this work is and you will be challenged — A LOT. You will put yourself in between the 'venom' and your workforce. You know what it's like because **you** have walked in their shoes.... The work will never be easy. You will often be second-guessed after the fact. You & they will stay strong in our purpose & intent.

*By the way — Patti is still with you calling or texting you EVERY single day these last 5 years to make sure you are ok.

The work will bring you through some of the most incredible experiences that positions CT as one of **THE BEST** child welfare jurisdictions in the country — so much so you get to end an amazing 31-year career in public service and try your hand at foundation and philanthropy work.



You will leave the agency in more than capable hands as you have prepared the seat for the **Next Up-Best Up...**

You will tell our story our way and will do your absolute best to show everyone the DCF **you** know and for that you will be truly honored, blessed, and grateful.

Remember to thank your mom for making sure you grew up to **know** you will do great things and don't forget to thank **Patti** for introducing you to this incredible ride!

Signed,

Me ~

Feb. 1, 2024

