

A Birthday Gift on Father's Day: "I wanted to give my daughter the best life possible."



June is National Family Reunification Month. It is also when families celebrate Fathers' Day which, this year, happened to fall on the same Sunday as John James' birthday.

While the Enfield resident could not have anticipated the timing, John received a gift in the form of reunification, or rather "unification", with his seven-year-old daughter Madison days before Father's Day.

"Unification" because, adding to the strange but happy coincidence, was the fact that John had not even been aware that he was a father until the past year. On top of that, several months prior, the possibility of having Madison live with him was not a guarantee. That changed with a letter from DCF and a long road of exhaustive prep work by John to prepare his life and his home for Madison.

"Once the DNA test came back DCF asked me what I wanted to do. I knew nothing about being a father, but I wanted to give my daughter the best life possible," he recalled.

A professional barber, John said, "I was just in a good spot in life to do that. I just knew I had to step up and do everything I could to protect and be there for my daughter."

Working with two social workers - Amanda Parsons and then Krystal Failey - John demonstrated every step of the way that he was ready to be a dad to his little girl. DCF social worker Krystal said John was exemplary in his willingness to partner with the Department to have his daughter in his life.



An "amazing team player," he remained communicative throughout and went above and beyond to do everything that was asked of him. Asked how she would describe John's commitment to the process, Krystal repeatedly said "motivated, extremely motivated."

Historically, child welfare efforts have focused on mothers as the gatekeepers while the vital role fathers play in a child's life can often be overlooked. However, studies show that children with involved fathers or positive male role models are more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy, and avoid high-risk behaviors. For that reason, Connecticut DCF has created an Office of Fatherhood Services to ensure better engagement of fathers as capable caregivers - equal to that of mothers.

From the start, John felt that as a dad he was on equal footing with his DCF social workers. Reflecting on his own experience, John believes that regardless of whether the reunifying parent is a mom or a dad, achieving a successful reunification is up to the individual.

"I grew up without a father, so I knew how important a father figure is to providing that stability and love in my daughter's life," said John. "There's a lot of stigma around DCF like they're out to get people. But if you're a father who's doing what he's supposed to be doing then you have as many rights as the mother. It's in your hands, nobody's stopping you. They're there to help. Krystal was always unbiased and provided advice and guidance."

John and his wife do not have any biological children of their own. When they received the news of Madison it came as a shock for both of them. Of his wife, John said, "she's my rock" and has been amazingly understanding about the whole thing.

Amanda Parsons, the DCF worker who began the process with John, had him and his wife attend parenting classes, individual and couples counseling, and began supervised visits one day each weekend.

"John was the most motivated father I've worked with in my eight years with DCF. I have encountered fathers who verbalized their interest in becoming involved in their children's life but sometimes things don't work out [for various reasons]," said Krystal. "We wanted John to remain an active participant and he did. John remained very patient and flexible the whole time."

The couple demonstrated their readiness and, when Krystal came onboard, those visits increased to two days each weekend. After a long road of DCF requests, John was reunified with Madison at the end of the school year.

"As soon as he found out [to the day of reunification], he provided the Department with whatever we asked of him. We recommended he attend marriage counseling with his wife to process this major change, and he immediately got into therapy with his wife."

Krystal said communication between a parent, or parents and their DCF-assigned worker is key. Also, the key is good communication between the parent being reunified and their child's biological or psychological family also referred to as their kinship network.

Research has shown that maintaining those relationships leads to a larger support system for the child and better life outcomes all around. However, at first, communication between John and Madison's kin family was admittedly shaky. John said Amanda and Krystal's guidance during that time and the role they both played as mediators was crucial to repairing that relationship.



John, Madison and John's wife at an outing to the bowling alley.

When John went to pick up his daughter, he and Madison's kinship provider talked it out and agreed to leave the past in the past.

"When we spoke, I told her let's start building some trust so my daughter can have a healthy relationship with the family she had known for 7 years. My goal was never to remove anyone from Madison's life but to add more [loving adults] to her life."

The relationship has now done a 180-degree turn compared to those early days. Madison often visits with her half sibling who is being fostered by another relative. John said his own mom, Madison's biological paternal grandmother, has been a huge help. From Day 1, John's mother was excited and ready to love the grandchild she was not aware she had until recently. In that short time, she had already built a strong bond with Madison as well as Madison's kinship network. That change in temperature was a relief for John.



Krystal Failey, Mr. John James, and Teresa Jenkins (DCF) pose together at the CT Fosters' Best Dad by Par event where John was awarded for his hard work and successful reunification with his daughter.

"Madison's psychological family was very welcoming of my mom when she brought Madison to see all her cousins. I felt like this was a step in the right direction of that [improved] relationship with that side of the family. A step in the right direction towards starting to build that trust we had talked about."

Looking back on the beginning of the almost two yearlong-process, John said he knew he wanted to be a great dad to Madison, including gaining custody of her. He stayed committed to the process, his DCF workers and began manifesting that dream into a reality.

John remembers looking around the home he and his wife own and saying, "We're going to turn that guest room into a pink castle-themed room for her with a princess bed and a pullout underneath just in case she wants to do sleepovers. As soon as I found out there was a likelihood Madison could come live with us I just kind of manifested it."

"It's a crazy story but I stayed positive no matter what. It was a hard process but a really fun process. It was so worth it. The hard work definitely paid off."