

"Come here because you want to help families, not just kids."



DCF employee and foster parent Elizabeth Saez has a tradition. Before any child she cares for is reunified or transitioned into another family, she has a celebration. Her family and friends come together - complete with a cake - to wish the children the best!

This is not "goodbye" but rather an acknowledgment of the new relationships formed with the hope

that the children placed, and their families, will remain in contact with Elizabeth and her family moving forward.

Elizabeth's phone frequently rings with birth parents providing updates on their children. Achievement of life milestones and school accomplishments are discussed along with invitations to



parties and other events. Older youth also outreach. Elizabeth is now a part of their extended family, and their families are part of her extended family.

To date, Elizabeth has cared for 129 children and counting. This includes babies up to a young adult 20 years old.

That's a lot of celebrations and a lot of cakes!

If the call from her own Agency comes, she says "yes." Facilitating a placement may require quick maneuvering within her home such as the night a desperate 9:00 p.m. request was received that a child needed a family. With every bedroom in her home already filled, there was a simple solution. "I have slept on the sofa and given up my room so kids could have a bed to sleep on," she stated. On the couch Elizabeth went so this little one had a safe family to care for him.

Elizabeth's journey to fostering began after receiving "the call" in December 2011 to provide kinship care for a relative's newborn. Without even having a crib or other supplies for the baby, she agreed to the placement and mobilized her support system to prepare for the child's arrival.

She has never looked back.

"I've always been helping my family informally for years," she stated. "Fostering is an extension of that but in a formal way. I'm helping people I don't know."

From where did she develop the passion to give back?

Elizabeth's mother was a role model to her and is known in the community for always lending a helping hand. "My mom was very supportive of others. She would take them for groceries, do laundry and bring them medical appointments. I have a lot of her qualities. I told her I hope to be like you."



"I felt like I did what I needed to," Elizabeth stated reflecting back on when the first child placed into her home was reunified. She then became licensed as a CORE home in 2013 as a backup to her good friend who was soon to adopt a child.

While the volume of children who have been cared for by Elizabeth and her family is impressive, even more so are her beliefs on being a foster parent. "My role is to be a support. I'm here to take care of their kids and my only motivation is to be helpful and open," she explained.



Elizabeth is one of six people nationwide to be recognized for her outstanding contributions to improving child welfare services. She was the 2024 "*Elevate and Celebrate*" honoree for her extraordinary dedication to foster care advocacy given by the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) of the Youth Law Center.

Elizabeth's deep commitment to improving the lives of children in foster care and supporting families was noted

as it has made a lasting impact on her community, particularly in the area of fostering teenagers.

The award was presented virtually with colleagues across the country in attendance, Elizabeth did not expect to be nominated and was "moved to tears" accepting the award. She still does not know who forwarded her name. "It's an honor. I don't do it for recognition. I just like helping people," Elizabeth stated.

Elizabeth's beliefs towards engaging with birth families are at the core of who she is and a primary focus of the Department's Quality Parenting Initiative. In fact, she exemplified the QPI philosophy well before Connecticut implemented the practice.

Her approach to interacting with families is clear. "I talk to them like they were a family member or a friend. I always think of if something was ever to happen to me, what I would want. How would I want someone to treat me if I was not capable of caring for my daughter at any point," Elizabeth described.

"I would want you to talk to me about how my daughter is doing."

Elizabeth and her family currently have 3-and 5-year-old siblings placed in their home. They Facetime with the parents every day. That relationship is mutually beneficial as the parents can see and interact with their children while Elizabeth can gain specific information about them such as behaviors, interests and parenting customs and practices from the people who know them the best.

Without question, it benefits the children to see the most important adults in their lives working together on their behalf.

"I do the work because I love doing the work," Elizabeth stated. "I like parenting, I like helping families. I like having the ability to be supportive to someone else."

## CONNECTICUT

---



Elizabeth's days are long as she works on the licensing and training side within the Foster Care Division. "I am doing the work during the day and then living it after I am done. Teaching and then doing it," she stated. Recently, Elizabeth taught a class on loss and grief. "My kids are in the middle of that," referring to the young children in her home.

Elizabeth acknowledges that fostering does have trying moments. "It's not always easy when kids leave," she stated. Those joyful moments do not come without some feelings of loss. Elizabeth has a 17-year-old daughter who has experienced several relationships end when the children are reunified.



father's home - to ease the transition on the child.

Yet, the family remains committed to opening their home to children in need and celebrating the moments when reunification takes place. "I love kids. I love helping them return home whenever possible," she emphatically stated. Elizabeth has even met DCF workers at parents' houses to facilitate reunification - including once during COVID-19 when she brought a young child to her

What would her message be to others considering fostering or adopting? "Come here because you want to help families, not just kids," she stated. "If you are open to building your circle, fostering can definitely enrich it. It brings a lot of love to it in a lot of ways. It has expanded my family in many ways. I have so many nieces and nephews now."

"Family doesn't always need to be blood."

"Elizabeth Saez nurtures all relationships and believes in the power and the importance of connection. The nurturer in her is on display with her coworkers, when training, and with family and with the children entrusted to her care and their families," stated Natalia Liriano Director of the Foster Care Division. "Bravo Elizabeth, you and so many like you, are deserving of the recognition!"

Elizabeth points out the best support for a foster parent is workers simply taking the time to listen to their needs and thoughts. "That in itself can be really great," she stated.

Tangible and concrete support such as finding childcare before and after work and community-based services are also critical to making the placement successful. "The supports I have today are not the same ones I had 10 years ago. Things have changed and things have evolved," Elizabeth stated.

Her last piece of advice to other licensed caregivers is to "reassess yourself" and "practice self-care." The complexity of the children requiring placement today continues to increase so asking yourself "Am I still in a good place" is critical to remaining strong. Elizabeth has found regular respite helpful.



Elizabeth keeps a log of all the children's names and ages who have walked through her doors. The 129+ children break down to approximately 36 who are 0-5 years of age, 34 children 6-12 years old, 56 teenagers and one youth over the age of 18 years. "I don't think I finished counting because I got tired," she stated. Each picture brings back a memory.

What continues to motivate her to remain licensed, to answer the call and facilitate yet another reunification?

"I have continued on this journey because I believe that children deserve excellent parenting every day. Children deserve to have families that will provide them love, stability, and structure, While maintaining an ongoing relationship with their family of origin. I believe this can be done hand-in-hand in partnership. In working together, we can make children's lives better. That is why I'm still on this journey," Elizabeth stated.