

Pieces of Me: Meet the 2025 Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Awardee



*Shaneka Hernandez, Child Services
Consultant at DCF's Transitional Supports
and Success Division.*

With more than two decades of service to DCF, Shaneka Hernandez has made a significant impact through her work both inside and outside of the Department. Shaneka has had a profound impact on the lives of many, particularly children and families of color, because of the authentic and empathetic approach she takes as a former Child Welfare Trainer at DCF's Academy for Workforce Development and now a Child Services Consultant at DCF's Transitional Supports and Success Division.

"When I became a trainer at the Academy, I wanted to make sure that those unsung things got attention - social and racial justice, that racial awareness and that understanding of human decency when it comes to different people from all walks of lives."

"Not just when it comes to working with and understanding our families of color, but also embracing that with each other - the people we work with. That's my biggest passion."

For those reasons, at the Department's annual Black History Month ceremony in February, Shaneka was selected out of a number of colleagues for the Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award which honors an African-American DCF staff member who has shown exceptional passion and commitment to children and families within the Black community. When asked what she believes stood out about her work that led to her nomination, Shaneka is humble.

"I honestly wasn't expecting the award at all because, everything I do, I don't do for the accolades or the acknowledgment. What I'm most passionate about is shedding a light on the 'privilege', for lack of a better word, for people that don't necessarily embrace or think about what that means."

Using her personal experiences to help others understand bias and the concept of "othering", Shaneka demonstrates both vulnerability and strength in her approach to training. She said being free to share her personal story is a huge component to her success as a DCF trainer.

"My testimony becomes the piece of work that allows for other people in similar situations to feel empowered. I feel like maybe that was the aspect of what set me aside [for the award] because I stood up in front of that room for four years training and sharing pieces of me."

Her focus on empowering others by sharing her story - which she refers to as "pieces of me" - creates a space for people to see themselves in her narrative and feel motivated to rise above their own challenges.

"Sharing my experiences with the most authentic piece of my heart, never having to hold back - the good, the bad and the ugly - that I've experienced working at DCF. That allows me to use that as a tool for [colleagues] to take from that what they will. My hope is that that will allow someone to understand or be able to move things forward themselves a little differently - a little better."



Shaneka finds out she is the recipient of the 2025 Dr. Janet E. Williams Humanitarian Award.

In her professional and personal life, Shaneka described how she felt the need, as a Black woman, to 'code switch'.

"As I shifted my way through the agency, I haven't always experienced the welcomeness for being my authentic self, so I had to rebuild some of the 'pieces of me' from those experiences. I had to think about what I'm saying and make sure I'm saying it the right way and making sure that I'm articulating it in the right way."

"Having to do that constant brain switching to make sure that I am received, that's a thing I'm always mindful of. I was always taught, you got to be 10 times better, 10 steps ahead, to make sure that I am at the same level as my white counterparts. Others may have had that experience but that's a topic that doesn't always get talked about or acknowledged."

When she got to the Academy of Workforce Development, Shaneka said those past experiences helped shape and start her journey of being a greater changemaker by telling her story in a way that was going to help others and make an impact on society at large.



"Breaking it down, I began to understand that it was okay to be my authentic self and there was power in my voice. Those trials and those tribulations built me to be a stronger person. There was power in the understanding of who I am as a person."

Recognizing the power of language and its long-lasting effects, Shaneka created and presents a training entitled "The Power of Words: The Long-Term Implications." She explained her past experiences were the catalyst for this brainchild of hers. The training explores how words can either uplift or harm communities, particularly in the context of racial discrimination. Shaneka educates participants on how

generalized statements can impact families of color and provides practical strategies for addressing and intervening in such situations.

"I wanted to do a training that was going to break that myth of the angry black woman. Break and address that lack of understanding of when you're going to a home, and you're going to a home of a person of color, and understanding that mother's defensiveness is not anger, it's her being scared. It's 'DCF is coming to my house.'"

"It's the oppression that she's already dealt with in her life and here's the system coming to infringe on me again."



Shaneka in action delivering a training to DCF provider My People Clinical Services.

Shaneka wants to make sure that new employees, many of whom will eventually conduct home visits, understand the power dynamics at play and the emotional weight that families, for example Black mothers, carry when dealing with a system that can feel intimidating and oppressive.

The training uses perspective-taking, and Shaneka urges workers to place themselves in the shoes of the individuals the Department serves to foster greater compassion, trust, and ultimately, more effective and respectful interactions.

The training emphasizes the importance of empathy in the role of social worker by pointing out the privilege that DCF employees bring into their roles, especially when working with marginalized communities. In that light, Shaneka encourages trainees to reach a deeper level of self-awareness and cultural sensitivity.

"I want them to take away an understanding of where the other person is coming from. [When developing "Power of Words"], I said I'm going to shift all of my experiences that I've had where I felt I was treated as 'less than' and use that to empower our new staff [when they interact with families]."

"What's underneath that's creating this [doing 'air quotes'] the aggression or the non-compliance? What words are we using that are actually going to make things worse for this family versus that family? What are the stigmas that are out there, because of the reality that society looks at this group of people one way or another?"

"Take the time to step back and think about where that mom is coming from. She may fear her kids will be separated from her. My hope, through my training, is that people just take a pause to better understand the [families we're serving]."

She jokes that the implicit bias course she taught was a Level I college elective, whereas "Power of Words" is like a 200 Level course requiring participants get into the "nitty gritty" about how an individual can make a meaningful difference in the work of DCF. Shaneka achieves that by taking a raw, authentic approach and, of course, doing so through a lens using those pieces of her.



Shaneka and DCF Comr. Jodi Hill-Lilly pose with Shaneka's Dr. Williams Humanitarian award.

"Now can you imagine [how much more impactful the training is] if I'm sitting across the table from you and laying out that these are the pieces of me that you guys should know and understand. 'This is me authentically. This is who I am.'"

While conversations of underlying systemic racism can be uncomfortable, Shaneka does not shy away from engaging in those discussions. She explained that it is easy to brush aside or ignore racial injustices and implicit bias but, for someone who is working with families of various ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds, you must embrace and acknowledge cultural differences.

Shaneka calls it "healthy dialogue."

"There is a difference, even though people want to make it seem like there isn't, there is a difference. So, we talk about it. We put it on the table, we create the space to be able to have open dialogues around those differences. And we have to embrace that so that we can actually do what's best for our families."

Through her "Power of Words" training, Shaneka has reached over 300 DCF staff and community providers, ensuring that the message of empowerment and inclusion extends far beyond her immediate circle. She has even delivered the training nationally, often for free, reflecting her dedication to making those "pieces of me" accessible to all.

Other pieces of Shaneka include being a foster care provider for years. She is a proud mother and adopted her youngest child, who is now fifteen, when she was three. As a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., she carries forth with her the organization's founding principles of giving back through public service to uplift and enrich others with an emphasis on programs that assist the African American community.

Shaneka's work in support of children and families of color extends beyond her role as a DCF trainer. She remains active in her community providing opportunities and safe spaces for young people of color to enjoy with their peers.

"I founded a hip-hop dance group for teens and adolescents from 12 to 18 and then 18 turned into 23 and then 23 turned into these kids are not kids!," she laughs. "We performed at different things like the True Colors conference, some staff appreciations at DCF. Those were my Black and Brown young people who didn't have anywhere to go. I just wanted to offer them a space, a safe space to just be themselves and not get caught up in the street life."

While Shaneka said she does not love the spotlight, she ensured she will be unwavering in her commitment to continuing to build and share those authentic pieces of her.

"My trials are a testimony that will help the current and future generations coming into DCF. I'm humbled by the fact that my voice is a conduit for that, and for the staff that I've touched through different aspects of my job and, of course, for the kids. Being here 20 plus years, it's uplifting to be part of this full circle thing called DCF."