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DCF SUCCESS



Agency gets credit from two for helping keep their lives on track, heading them toward triumph. Page 3

Cover Stories

Making the most out of difficult situations

DCF helps local youths pursue dreams of better life

By Francine Maglione
Herald-Press staff

NEW BRITAIN — In their relatively short lives, 22-year-olds Danielle Ursiullo and Donald Parsons have been through a lot.

With a slew of family issues and intervention from the state Department of Children and Families, the two have managed to overcome it all and move on to become well-adjusted college graduates ready for the working world.

"Last year there were 565 kids [in Connecticut] who went to either two-year schools or four-year schools under DCF supervision," said Lisa Flower-Murphy, spokeswoman for the department. "It's a huge program."

To be eligible for state help in college, students in the department program must be stable in their environment and get good grades in school.

Ursiullo decided to attend Northeastern University, in Boston, mainly because of the location.

"I wanted to get away," she said. "I wanted to go to school in a city."

The department took a permanent role in Ursiullo's life when she was 12 or 13. Born and raised in New Britain, Ursiullo lived with her mother and moved with her to East Hartford and Torrington before moving in with her father's parents in Berlin when her mother was "at her worst."

Ursiullo holds an ill will toward her mother, however, saying that she had a difficult life herself.

"She did the best with what she had," Ursiullo said.

She also has three siblings whom she tries to see as often as possible.

"I don't want to say that I necessarily had more of a diffi-



Any Reed/The Herald-Press
Danielle Ursiullo and Donald Parsons, both 22, had tough childhoods, but with the help of the state Department of Children and Families, they have graduated from Northeastern University and Mitchell College, respectively.



cult childhood than anybody else," she said. "I think that everybody has a difficult child-

hood. Everybody's family situation is different."

While in school, Ursiullo worked at McLean Hospital as a mental health counselor for suicidal patients, studied in Italy for four months and worked on the Husky Energy Action Team, successfully convincing her school's president to sign a contract to reduce carbon emissions at the school.

Northeastern is a co-op school, meaning that in a school year students are expected to spend six months in school and six months in an internship.

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DCF

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For her internships, Urciullo worked at a group home for kids, as an afterschool program coordinator and at McLean, where she still works.

Urciullo took on a psychology major and sociology minor because of her interest in working with people. "I was always really good at analyzing other people," she said. "I'm definitely a people-person."

Urciullo has had the same social worker, Steve, since her freshman year of high school and has been thankful for his help.

"He's definitely been a consistent

figure in my life," she said. "He's always willing to bend or break for me, which I really appreciate."

Urciullo is living in Jamaica Plain, Mass., with a friend, and would like to work for the DCF.

Parsons was born and raised in Bristol. The department first entered his life when he was 13 and removed him from his home. He was placed in a youth shelter for a year before finally getting a foster home.

"I was just happy to have a roof over my head," he said.

In June 1999 he moved in with his first foster family in Portland, but the it didn't work out.

He was sent to another foster family in East Hampton in October 2001 and remains in close contact with them.

Once he turned 18, Parsons made the decision to stay with the DCF program so they could help him get a college education.

He spent five years at Mitchell College in New London, a school that specializes in teaching students with specialized needs — those who may be dealing with issues such as attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and bipolar disorder. For three years he worked as a residential assistant at the school.

Feeding off of his love for math and science, he worked toward his associate degree in marine science, then graduated with his bachelor's degree in criminal justice in May.

Parsons credits the efforts of his social worker, Debbie, for

much of his success.

"She's great," he said. "She's impacted me a lot."

Parsons has four biological siblings and three foster siblings. Like Urciullo, Parsons maintains a close relationship with his mother. "She's been there as a support system with me right along the way," he said.

As for what's next in Parsons' life, he plans to go back to school for his master's in forensics and eventually go into crime scene investigation work.

Parsons has been engaged for five years to a girl who was also an RA at Mitchell, and the two will marry in August 2009.

He lives in New London and is looking for jobs in security. He

London Police Department.

Urciullo and Parsons are moving forward.

Urciullo said she wouldn't change any of those obstacles, been good for her. "They definitely made me the person I am today," she said. "I would say that I am extremely strong-willed, courageous, goal-driven and ambitious because of them."

Parsons said he is continuously learning from everyone and everything around him.

"Some people say that the world is a habitual learning place," he said. "I like that philosophy."

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