

## He'll be home for Christmas



Johnathon Henninger / Record-Journal

**By: Jeffery Kurz, Record-Journal staff**  
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MERIDEN - Raymond Aponte Jr. remembers clearly the day his son was taken from his home.

"It was the worst feeling I ever felt," he said. "I'm with him 24 hours a day - he's my life. All I have is him."

But on Oct. 6, by court order, 2-year-old Raymond Aponte III was taken from his father by social workers with the state Department of Children and Families and placed in a foster home.

From that day, all Aponte wanted was to get his son back.

"It hurt me real bad," recalled Aponte, 21. "I didn't know what to do with myself. I was ready to do whatever I needed to do right then and there."

The toddler has what are typically referred to as medically complex conditions. Those include cerebral palsy and gray matter heterotopia, a neurological disorder that usually involves epilepsy. He also has optic nerve hypoplasia. He can detect shapes and colors, but not much else.

In some ways, Raymond is not unlike other little boys. He giggles when tickled, loves to have his back rubbed and squeezes his father's hand hard. Spend even a few minutes with father and son and it's clear there's a strong bond between them.

Born in Meriden, Aponte grew up in Waterbury. He dropped out of Crosby High School when his son was born to 16-year-old Krystal Garcia. Because he'd dropped out, Aponte lost his job as a counselor at the Waterbury Boys Club. He said he was told he was no longer a good role model.



Aponte now lives in Meriden at the home of Juan Rivera, whom he considers his father figure. Others in the all-male household are Nathan and Josh Rivera, students at Platt High School. Aponte thinks of them as his half-brothers. There's also a dog, Tuscany.

Aponte says problems were apparent with Raymond early on, when his mother noticed he wasn't focusing. They made an appointment with a doctor and were told Raymond was blind and there was no cure, Aponte said. He and Garcia broke up in the spring, and Aponte has been the primary caregiver.

Taking care of Raymond would have been a major challenge for any parent, said Robert Gurtowski, a social worker with the DCF Meriden region.

"We ran into a situation where the medical doctor said something needed to be done," he said. "So we had to do a removal."

Specifically, Aponte was having trouble making sure Raymond received timely medications. The boy was also not maintaining his weight.

"I knew how to feed him, but he wasn't taking the food," Aponte said.

Today, Aponte keeps a meticulous journal of just about everything related to Raymond. But he had to learn how to do it.

Aponte "genuinely cares for his child," Gurtowski said. "He was determined. There is no question. It just seemed he was overwhelmed with the things that needed to be done."

At any given time, there are about 4,300 Connecticut children in foster care who have been taken from their homes, said Lisa Flower, program director with the DCF communications office. "That number stays consistent," she said. Of those, about half are eventually returned, Flower said.

However, "we are in dire need of medically complex foster homes," Flower said.

Raymond was sent to the Griswold home of Susan and Lou Harper, who have been foster parents, specializing in helping children with medically complex conditions, for the past decade. Lou Harper is pastor of the First Congregational Church in Griswold. The Harpers have also adopted 14 children.

Raymond was a little different, said Lou Harper, because most of the medically complex children he and his wife have foster parented are babies born prematurely.

"Here, we've been able to help parents get the resources they need to get their child home," Lou Harper said. "And, to us, it's a success. Not many parents have the skills, the training and the desire to do the type of parenting we do."

Aponte, whom many people call Tony (his middle name is Antonio) would visit Raymond and the Harpers and different doctors at the church, learning what he needed to do to take care of his son. It was unusual, said Lou Harper, because nearly all of the time it's the mother who is involved in returning the child home.

He described Aponte as "pretty dedicated, but I don't think he can imagine in his wildest dreams what it's going to be like when his child grows."

"Tony's a good father," he said, "and he's doing a good job."

Raymond spent six weeks away from home. Gurtowski said the aim was to have him back with Aponte before Christmas, but as it turned out, an earlier holiday was involved. Raymond came home the day before Thanksgiving.

"We know how challenging it can be to care for a child with special needs, and if we can help a parent rise to that challenge, we want to do everything we can to support that," said DCF Commissioner Susan I. Hamilton in a prepared statement.



Aponte now has a number of social services to rely on for support, including visiting nurses, a medical home coordinator and intensive safety planning. He also has the support of his mother and of Raymond's mother, both of whom live in Waterbury. Christmas Day will be a busy one, with celebrations in the different households, said Aponte.

It looks as though Santa has a toy box in mind for Raymond this Christmas.

"He likes toys with textures," Aponte said.

Aponte plans to earn his high school equivalency degree and find employment. He'd like to return to working with kids. But at least until Raymond turns 3, his full-time job will be as a parent. Harper said the most important aspect of that task is that Aponte gets a break now and then.

Once Raymond enrolls in early intervention, "hopefully that will give dad the time to get done what he wants to get done," Gurtowski said.

"I don't want to lose him again," said Aponte. "I don't want to be anything like my biological father, who wasn't there for me. I don't have the heart to do that. I'm doing everything I can for him."

Flower said she admired Aponte for his willingness to discuss his experience.

"A lot of people don't want to talk about it because there's a stigma," she said. "Tony was willing to talk about it so people will learn."

Having his son back makes this holiday season very special.

"It's perfect, actually," said Aponte. "I don't have much money this year, but that doesn't really matter. I can't ask for anything else, really. As long as I've got him with me, I'm fine."

"He's my life," he said. "I look at him and I see myself."

Information about adoption and foster parenting is online at the state Department of Children and Families site: [www.ct.gov/dcf](http://www.ct.gov/dcf). There's also a hotline: 1-888-KID-HERO.

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