



A Home for a Lifetime

Hundreds of Connecticut children are waiting for a family to welcome them with open arms. Is your future son or daughter one of them?



Did you know that more than 500 children are adopted from the Connecticut foster care system every year? Adopting through the Department of Children and Families (DCF) is a wonderful way to create or enhance your family and create a lifelong relationship with a child.

Many parents or prospective parents dream of adding a child to their family. For the many Connecticut children in need of a home, their greatest wish is to belong to a family who will be with them through life's ups and downs, and who will provide the nest from which they can venture out into the world and

spread their wings.

Some people think about babies when they consider adoption. But DCF is always seeking adoptive families to parent children from all backgrounds and of every age. We are especially in need of families who can care for sibling groups, teenagers and children with medically complex needs.

You might think you need to own a home, be married, have already parented, have a medical background or be wealthy to become an adoptive parent, but that is not true. The process is free and the only "cost" is your time and commitment.

DCF provides training and support

throughout this time. Upon a child's placement in your home, you receive a medical and financial subsidy, and most children are eligible for this subsidy to continue after the finalization of the adoption until young adulthood. Support services are available before and after a child joins your family. DCF also offers college financial assistance for children adopted from the DCF foster care system.

You are only a phone call away from making a positive change in your life and the life of a child. There is no need to go overseas or even out of state to adopt. There are children right in your own backyard who need your love.



DCF Commissioner Joette Katz

Home At Last

When DCF matches at-risk children with adoptive parents, magic happens.

By DCF Commissioner, Joette Katz

For children who are temporarily unable to live with their biological families due to abuse or neglect, foster families provide a much-needed haven: somewhere they can feel safe, respected and cared for.

But for those children who can't ever return to their mothers and/or fathers, temporary care – even long-term temporary care – is not a solution. As good as foster care can be, these children need a permanent home.

More than 500 individuals and couples adopt children through the state Department of Children and Families (DCF) each year. These adoptive parents are taking into their homes kids who have had horrible things happen to them.

DCF doesn't remove children from their families of origin without reason. Many of these youngsters have suffered chronic physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. In the case of children who become available for adoption, there's no real possibility that the parents will ever work through their significant challenges, whether they relate to addiction, an abusive or violent personality, or a pattern

of criminal behavior that places their children in jeopardy.

The products of this type of family situation are victimized, traumatized children who need to have people around them to help rebuild their self-esteem, ensure that they feel safe, and shower them with love and attention.

This undertaking is not always an easy one. Because of all they've been through, some children may act out to see how far they can push the limits before they might be harmed again, as they believe they inevitably will be.

Little by little, adoptive parents must rebuild children's trust and help them to understand that they are safe and loved, that they are finally in their forever home and will be staying there, no matter what.

For an individual or couple, that's a huge responsibility to take on. We have incredible expectations of our adoptive parents, and yet large numbers of people step up and welcome these children into their families.

Why do they do it? The answer is simple. They love children. They want to make a positive difference in a child's

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life – and their own. And they realize that the potential impact on these kids is enormous.

These are children who have been abandoned and abused and given up on. When someone actually adopts them, there is a sense of permanency, a sense that the rough road they have traveled has finally come to an end. There is a realization that they have finally, truly come home. The magic of adoption helps children heal.

When we talk to adoptive parents, they say that the rewards make it all worthwhile, that they would do it again in a heartbeat.

If you have love to share with a child, call us. A profoundly positive change in your life may be just a phone call away.

FOSTER CARE & ADOPTION

Myths and Misconceptions

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is responsible for the welfare and protection of all of Connecticut's children. Thousands of caseworkers, who oversee the needs of foster and adoptive families, are frequently asked to address myths and misconceptions surrounding this service. Here are the most common of these myths and the answers to them:

1

MYTH It's really hard to become a foster or adoptive parent.

FACT It's not as hard as you think!

While there are guidelines for approval, DCF will help you through them.

2

MYTH You must be married to be a foster or adoptive parent.

FACT Everyone is welcome!

You do not have to be married to be a foster or adoptive parent. People who cohabit, or are divorced or single, may be foster or adoptive parents.

3

MYTH People with criminal records or past involvement with DCF cannot be foster or adoptive parents.

FACT DCF evaluates each family on a case-by-case basis.

Each person's situation is unique and can be discussed with a DCF agency representative for further assessment and consideration.

4

MYTH You must own your own home to be a foster or adoptive parent.

FACT Not at all.

If you rent a home or apartment and the landlord provides permission for the child to live with you in his or her dwelling, you need not own a home to be a foster or adoptive parent.

5

MYTH You cannot be a foster or adoptive parent if you are gay/lesbian.

FACT DCF welcomes gay and lesbian parents as caregivers for Connecticut's children!

DCF does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. Many gay and lesbian people have come forward to be a family for a child.

6

MYTH Only people who have children or whose children are grown can be foster or adoptive parents.

FACT Parenting experience is not a factor.

Those who have never been a parent can still be foster or adoptive parents. You will receive training and support to help foster a child from the DCF team!

7

MYTH People who work full time cannot be foster or adoptive parents.

FACT Many licensed foster parents and adoptive parents work full time.

Adults who work full time outside of the home can still be foster parents. A preschooler would need to be enrolled in a full-time licensed daycare facility. DCF helps with daycare costs. Adults who are working full time are also eligible to adopt.

8

MYTH Only younger adults can be foster or adoptive parents.

FACT On the contrary – adults of all ages have a wealth of experience to share!

DCF does not discriminate on the basis of age. Anyone 21 years or older may apply to become a foster or adoptive parent.

9

MYTH I can't have the neighborhood teenager babysit for my foster or adoptive child when I go out socially.

FACT Foster parenting and having a social life are not mutually exclusive.

If you know a local teen who you feel is appropriately trained to supervise children, he or she will be allowed to babysit a foster child in the foster family's home. Adoptive parents also have the right to select an appropriate babysitter for their child.

10

MYTH Biological parents are "bad" people who should never get their kids back.

FACT That's rarely true.

Biological parents love their children but they are having difficulties maintaining their safety and well-being. DCF ensures the safety of children, while helping parents access the resources and services they need to help overcome their current circumstances. The department works with biological parents, caregivers and community providers to assist with reunification when appropriate. However, when reunification is not possible, the department looks to place a child into an adoptive home.

11

MYTH A foster or adoptive child must have his or her own bedroom.

FACT Sharing a bedroom is permitted.

DCF will assist foster parents in determining bedroom arrangements during the home study process. Adoptive parents can determine the most appropriate sleeping arrangements for their children.

12

MYTH Foster or pre-adoptive kids can't go on family vacations with their caregivers.

FACT DCF believes that vacations are good for the whole family – including foster and pre-adoptive children!

With adequate notice, discussion with the biological parents, and authorization of DCF, foster families are actually encouraged to take foster and pre-adoptive children on family vacations. After adoption, parents are free to take their children on vacation.

13

MYTH Foster and adoptive kids can't participate in play dates or sleepovers at a friend's home.

FACT **Actually, both are permitted.**

DCF believes foster and adoptive children should have a normal social life. Of course, as with all parenting decisions, we ask that foster and adoptive parents use good judgment when making these decisions.

14

MYTH Biological parents will come to a foster or adoptive home to visit with their child.

FACT **DCF staff members work with biological and foster families to determine the best arrangement for them and the child(ren).**

In most cases, DCF encourages foster parents to have some connection with the child's family via letters, phone calls, emails or face-to-face contact. Visitation requirements are set by the court, but foster families are not required to hold visits in their homes. Contact after adoption finalization is determined by an open adoption agreement, if one was agreed to in court.

15

MYTH You need to have medical and dental insurance in order to care for a foster or adoptive child.

FACT **DCF assumes all medical and dental insurance for its foster and adoptive children.**

In most cases, the foster and adoptive families can choose their medical and dental providers, as long as these providers accept the insurance coverage offered by DCF.

16

MYTH Only wealthy families can be foster or adoptive parents.

FACT **Foster and adoptive parents don't have to be rich – just financially stable.**

Foster and adoptive parents need only demonstrate that they are able to pay bills and support their individual and family needs. DCF provides monthly reimbursement checks to help defray costs of food, clothing, extracurricular activities and other necessities that are incurred by a foster child or a child placed for adoption, prior to finalization. In certain circumstances, adoptive parents will receive an ongoing financial subsidy according to the child's special needs.

17

MYTH Foster and adoptive parents are required to pay college tuition for these children.

FACT **Not usually.**

DCF pays the tuition costs for foster children to attend college. While the foster child may attend the college of his/her choice, tuition is allocated on the basis of whatever Central Connecticut State University is charging for tuition each year. Any child adopted after Jan. 1, 2005 is eligible for the DCF college tuition assistance program.

18

MYTH Foster and adoptive parents must be able to speak English.

FACT **DCF does not discriminate on the basis of language.**

People whose first language is Spanish – or another language – are equally eligible to become foster or adoptive parents.



Photo by Brachy E. Cliff

Regular Adoption

Meant to Be

For nearly two years, Mae Gibson-Brown of New Haven kept the picture of a little boy – who looked like he could be a member of her family – on her refrigerator. Little did she know that he would one day become her son.

Some might call it coincidence. Others would say it was “meant to be.”

A curious chain of events began in 2001 when Mae, a long-time schoolteacher and gospel singer, appeared on TV, singing with a group. Soon after, “I got a call from a lady whose daughter I had taught almost 25 years ago, and she said, ‘I saw you on TV. What else are you doing now?’”

The woman, who worked with Jewish Family Services, asked if Mae knew anyone who would like to become a foster or adoptive mother, and offered to send some information.

“She sent me this packet that had about 12 children’s profiles on it. My granddaughter Ra’Mona was living with me at the time, going to college. She pulled out this picture and said, ‘Look at this little boy named William. He looks like he could belong to our family.’ She put his picture on the refrigerator and it stayed there. Five months later, I decided I would train to become a foster parent.”

Her first placement was a 16-year-old boy who was reunited with his family after four or five months.

Then, a year and a half after Mae first saw the packet, a call came from Jewish Family Services, saying that there was a boy in Washington, Connecticut, who was ready to be placed in a home.

“We took the long ride to Washington, and when I walked into the room and they pointed him out to me, I said, ‘That’s the little boy who’s been on my refrigerator for two years.’”

William, who was 9 years old at the time, had been through a lot in his short life. Both of his parents had abused drugs. His mother terminated her parental rights when her son was 3 and his father did the same at age 4. Over the next five years, William was

in and out of foster homes, and landed in a residential school.

Mae clearly recalls the day they met. “He said, ‘I think I would like a ‘family.’ I said, ‘A family?’ He said, ‘Yeah. What is it like to be part of a family?’ I said, ‘You will be around people who love you a lot and you probably won’t be alone very much.’ I felt like I could have picked him up right there and then, but they had to make sure he was cleared legally.”

It wasn’t long before William came to live with her. She still remembers the date: August 11, 2003. And while she was warned that he tended to hoard food and wet the bed, she saw no evidence of either.

Mae, who has had six children, seventeen grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren, and travels often to be with her large family, said William “fit in like he should have been here from day one.”

That’s not to say there haven’t been difficult moments. Shortly after his first Christmas with Mae, a neighborhood child came to the door and accused William of stealing an item from him.

“It totally surprised me, because it was out of character for him,” Mae explained. “I said to him, ‘In this family, we don’t steal.’ He replied, ‘I didn’t take it, and I’m not leaving this house.’ I reprimanded him and said, ‘You need to go to your room and think about it.’”

The memory of that incident is still vivid for William, now 20 years old. “I yelled and stamped my feet and stomped up the stairs,” he said.

What Mae didn’t know was that William, who had been taken abruptly from a number of foster homes, was terrified of having the same thing happen again, even though he had done nothing wrong. He imagined a social worker coming in the middle of the night and taking him away from his beloved home. For the next two days, he slept in his clothes, with his suitcase packed, waiting for a knock on the door that he was sure would come.

When she discovered what he was doing, Mae was quick to reassure him that he was part of the family – and was not going anywhere.

“There has not been a day since I had him that I’ve regretted having William in my life,” she says today, 10 years later. “My family has surrounded him with love. He calls them his aunts, uncles, and cousins. We went to Winston-Salem, North Carolina for a family Thanksgiving last year. There were 31 of us. He’s not looked at as an adoptive child. It’s William, and William is part of the family.”

“That’s what I had hoped for” as a child, William says. “I hoped to meet that one right family where I could just stay and not worry about anything.”

Mae said that William is extremely close to her son Charles, who has been a true father figure to him – so much so that William calls him ‘Dad.’

“When I got ready to adopt him, William said he wanted his legal name to be changed to William Charles Brown, Mae recalled. “He called Chuck on the phone to tell him. I could hear Chuck all the way across the room, screaming [with joy].”

A true success story

Just as he blended seamlessly with the Brown family, William had no trouble fitting in at school. “He makes friends easily,” said Mae.

While he has struggled with math and homework at times, he has also enjoyed some impressive academic achievements. When he was in seventh grade, the school sent out a notice announcing a writing competition. The topic? “Drug abuse is not cool.”

William was initially reluctant, but Mae persuaded him to enter.

William’s 200-word essay took first place in his category for New Haven. He and Mae attended a reception in the winners’ honor, and he was presented with gifts.

But that wasn’t the end of it. The contest organizers submitted the essay at the state level, where he won first place and received a framed citation from then-Governor Jodi Rell. His essay subsequently captured first place in the nationals.

“Someone in New York City saw the essay,” said Mae, picking up the story. “We were in Georgia for Christmas, and they came to visit us there and told us a benefactor wanted to sponsor children to take a trip to Europe. So in

William’s freshman year, he received an all-expenses-paid trip to Germany and stayed in a castle. They even bought his luggage.”

Mae noted that William has not only been active in his school but in the community as well. He video records the services at his family’s church every Sunday, and also spends six hours weekly at the Yale Public Library, working with kids.

“We play musical chairs, I play movies for them, and I read books out loud to a big group of kids. For the younger children, I do a singsong, read a book, and let them play with their toys,” William said.

“For people around my age, I help them get a library card, and on Wednesday nights there’s game night for Wii and Playstation. Kids can come and play, and bring their friends. They can do a competition and get a prize.”

These days, he said, life is good. “I feel happy and secure.”

Looking to the future

With high school successfully completed, he looks forward to a bright future. “I’m going straight to college,” he said proudly.

This past fall, William began his post-secondary education at Gateway Community College in New Haven, ranked by *The New York Times* as one of the top colleges and universities in Connecticut for incoming freshmen.

After that, he plans to attend Johnson & Wales University in Rhode Island. He wants to become a chef. “I just like to cook a lot, and like to try new foods,” he said.

Mae is very proud of her youngest son. “He is a very carefully trained person. He could go anywhere and I’m comfortable with him going [because] he’s so on target with what he knows is right. He has a serious sense of obedience and fairness,” she said.

At the same time, she does worry about all of the street violence in New Haven. She prays that “he’s constantly protected and his angels are watching over him. Religion is very important in our family’s life.”

Asked to describe how he feels about his life today, William said, “I feel grateful. Later in life, I want to go around the city or the world and talk to kids who went through what I went through, and encourage them not to give up – to let them know that you can make it.”

DCF Offices

Central Office

Hartford
505 Hudson Street 06106
(860) 550-6300

Region 1

Bridgeport
100 Fairfield Avenue 06604
(203) 384-5300

Norwalk

149 Water Street 06854
(860) 899-1400

Stamford

401 Shippan Avenue 06902
(203) 348-5865

Region 2

Milford
38 Wellington Road 06461
(203) 306-5300

New Haven

One Long Wharf Drive 06511
(203) 786-0500

Region 3

Middletown
2081 South Main Street 06457
(860) 638-2100

Norwich

2 Courthouse Square 06360
(860) 886-2641

Willimantic

322 Main Street 06226
(860) 450-2000

Region 4

Hartford
250 Hamilton Street 06106
(860) 418-8000

Manchester

364 West Middle Turnpike 06040
(860) 533-3600

Region 5

Danbury
131 West Street 06810
(203) 207-5100

Torrington

62 Commercial Boulevard 06790
(860) 496-5700

Waterbury

395 West Main Street 06702
(203) 759-7000

Region 6

Meriden
One West Main Street 06451
(203) 238-8400

New Britain

One Grove Street 06053
(860) 832-5200

DCF Facilities

Middletown

Connecticut Juvenile Training School
1225 Silver Street 06457
(860) 638-2400

Albert J. Solnit Center South
1225 Silver Street 06457
(860) 704-4000

East Windsor

Albert J. Solnit Center North
36 Gardner Street 06088
(860) 292-4000



Photo by Bradley E. Clift

Single Parent

An Instant Connection

When Kryston Pearce first considered adopting a child, she was filled with doubts.

“Being single, I didn’t think I’d qualify” to be an adoptive mother, the Norwich woman said.

Among the questions she asked herself were: “Can I do it? Shouldn’t a child have both a mother and a father? Do I have enough money?”

But one day, she saw a TV commercial that said, “You don’t have to be a perfect parent.”

“A light bulb went off and I thought, ‘I can do this; I can help change someone’s life,’” Kryston said.

And after seeing a photograph of “Lauren” – on the Department of Children and Families website – Pearce felt an immediate connection with the shy, soft-spoken girl.

“I knew she was the one,” Kryston said. “I knew she was my girl.”

“I wanted a place to call home,” said Lauren, a 14-year-old who admits she was worried that no one would adopt her.

Older children – Lauren was 10 when Kryston adopted her – aren’t always the focus of would-be parents, who often prefer younger kids. But happily, Kryston felt otherwise.

“Lauren is everything to me,” Kryston said. “She is my dream child.”

The multiracial mother and daughter have an easy rapport and enjoy movies and music together. “We have the same sense of humor and we’ve been told that we finish each other’s sentences,” Kryston said.

The eighth grader – who’s on the academic honor roll – says she loves her new mother, “because she understands me. I’m just like her.” Mom, meanwhile, admits to babying and spoiling Lauren.

Despite her initial trepidations,

Kryston said the parenting classes and other assistance she received from DCF were invaluable. “They taught me a lot,” she said, including how to handle potentially difficult behaviors that a child might present.

DCF did not charge an onerous fee for its services, as a private adoption agency would. And Kryston also appreciates that she was assigned a ‘mentor’ – “someone who has already been through the [adoption] process ... who could answer any questions I might have.” She is currently in the process of adopting a second child – a nine-year old girl.

Her advice for people considering adoption is: “Please be patient” and realize that many children have been traumatized and may act up because of that.

“Just work through it and don’t expect a child to be perfect,” she said.

“Once you get them to love and bond with you, it’s all really worth it.”



Siblings

Love To Spare

Not everyone would feel up to the task and the responsibility of adopting several children at once. But that's just what Edward and Winsome Cross did, bringing siblings Angelica, 8, Krystofer, 7, and Peter, 5, together.

The brothers and sister were living in different homes when the Bridgeport couple saw their photographs in the Heart Gallery section of the Department of Children and Families website.

The children joined Daniel, now 11, who had previously become part of the Cross family via a private adoption. He prayed for the company of siblings and asked his parents to make his dream come true.

Without the company of children, Winsome said, Daniel "would be saddened, because ... there would be nobody for him to play with." But their adoption decision also "just came naturally because both Edward and I are from large families and are used to having a lot of children around," she said. "We didn't want them to be separated, so we decided to make an extra effort to keep them together," he said.

After an early period of adjustment, the youngsters seem happy in their new environment. "They are reaching out for love and affection," Edward said.

A Realtor by occupation, Winsome

scaled back her work dramatically, in order to make them her main focus. "They needed so much of my attention," she said, adding that her sacrifice has been well worth it.

"Their whole attitude and outlook ... how they react emotionally, has changed for the better," she said.

The couple has had strong support from DCF, including parenting classes and the help of a social worker. Whenever any help is needed, "they are just a phone call away," Winsome said.

Edward believes that the department gave his family "special attention," since they were coping with three new children at the same time.

One reason the couple chose to adopt through DCF this time is because "private adoption costs you," Winsome said. With DCF, "you are given [financial] compensation." And even after adoption, a variety of support continues.

"I'd definitely recommend to someone thinking about adoption, to go ahead and make the move," Edward said. "If they have any questions or apprehensions, go ahead and contact DCF. I'm sure their response will be positive."

By adopting even a single child, you can make a dent in the large number of children waiting for loving parents, Winsome said. "Every child you help makes a difference."



Photos by Bradley E. Clift



Special Needs

Completing the Circle

After Becky Iannantuoni had her third child, she still believed that a fourth child would enter her life, even though doctors told her she couldn't give birth again.

The Bethany, Connecticut woman – a lawyer whose practice deals with special needs planning – also knew that her next child would have special needs, as does her own sister Janey, who has cerebral palsy.

And when she saw a photograph of Gannon, an autistic boy – in the Heart Gallery of the Department of Children and Families website – something stirred within her.

When Becky proposed adopting Gannon, her husband Mark was initially lukewarm to the idea. But that changed quickly when they actually met Gannon.

"It was love at first sight," Mark said. Despite the challenges that come with

raising an autistic child – in Gannon's case, he is prone to occasional tantrums and stubbornness – the now 11-year-old "fit a space [in the family] that we didn't know was empty," Mark said.

"He was exactly what we needed, but didn't know we needed," Becky said. "He made our family make sense."

The couple agrees that bringing Gannon into their world has made them better parents, has reaffirmed the strength and quality of their marriage, and has helped their other children exercise positive aspects of their natures that weren't as apparent before.

For instance, oldest child Matthew, 16, has been very impressive for his nurturing and caregiving, as has Emily, 13. Jack, who is 14, has become Gannon's protector and disciplinarian, teaching him right from wrong.

Institutionalized for the first seven years of his life, Gannon is thriving

with his adoptive family, attending elementary school and acting up less often, in a very loving and structured home environment.

With the help of DCF, the entire family has learned to adapt to Gannon's idiosyncrasies.

"The support that you get – including parenting classes – is great," Mark said. Largely because of that support, "we felt fairly competent and confident early on."

Becky added, "If you needed something, DCF was right there, ready to give it to you."

While noting that adopting a child can be "hard" and "frustrating" at times, the couple would tell other prospective parents that the effort is "totally worth it."

"What we've gotten back [from Gannon] is so phenomenal," Mark said.

"I feel that he was born for us," said Becky.



Photos by Bradley E. Cliff

Open Adoption Room For All

For Alberto Portalatin, life has brought a mix of challenges and rewards. But today – as he sits with his wife Ruth in their Waterbury home and watches their four adopted children laughing and playing together – there is nothing but joy.

“Sometimes I cry because I am so happy that we’ve been able to keep these kids together,” he says of siblings Diego, 8, Hector, 7, Natashalize, 6, and Mirelis, 4. “I feel very happy, very blessed.”

The joy was born through hardship. Alberto, a police officer and detective in his native Puerto Rico, moved to the U.S. in 1995. Speaking through Spanish translator and DCF social worker Emily Marin, he explained that many years ago, while he was still living in Puerto Rico, his daughter experienced a difficult period in her life. Child Protective Services stepped in to remove her children and suddenly, Alberto found himself temporarily caring for his grandchildren.

“Fortunately, she was able to recuperate and be a resource for her children,” he said. But the experience planted an idea in his

mind. So when it turned out that Ruth, his second wife, was unable to have children of her own, they began discussing adoption.

About six years ago, Alberto and Ruth attended a DCF information session, and subsequently tried to adopt a group of siblings through an outside agency. It was not successful. They went back to DCF to try again.

Another family was initially identified as adoptive parents for two young brothers in the system, but that adoption fell through. “The biological mother gave birth to a daughter, and [the other family] couldn’t take the female child,” Emily explained. For the Portalatins, that was a heaven-sent opportunity. All three children were placed in their home in an open adoption scenario. (The birth mother and paternal family members know how the kids are doing, and are able to see them on occasion.)

A year after welcoming the three siblings into their home, Alberto and Ruth learned that the mother was pregnant again and DCF asked if the couple would consider taking in a fourth. “At first, they said no,”

Emily recalled. “They thought it was too much. But then they started having visitations and they saw the baby. They fell in love with her. She was placed with this family when she was two months old.”

“If God sent this little angel, we had to have her also,” said Ruth.

Today, Alberto and Ruth share the task of raising four children under the age of 9. “She has so much patience with them,” he said of his wife, adding that the children are very close. “They’re very loving toward each other, and the baby will not go to sleep at night until she gives a kiss and a hug to all of her siblings and to mommy and daddy.”

He added, “There’s the usual sibling rivalry and running around, but it makes me so happy to know that they will grow up having those memories.”

The couple works closely together in parenting the children, supporting and helping each other in every way. They are teaching the children “to study, to be good citizens in the community, to be respectful, to love God, and to love their family,” Alberto said.

“We’re enjoying every minute of it.”

The Heart Gallery

The Heart Gallery is a photo art display featuring remarkable children and youth in state care who need an adoptive family. Volunteer professional photographers give their time and talent in capturing each child's and youth's personality in a photographic portrait.

The photos of children who agree to be featured are assembled into an exhibit that travels across Connecticut, bringing these inspiring portraits to theaters, children's museums, galleries, hospitals, malls, libraries,

town halls, and other public exhibit spaces and gathering places. The gallery is also displayed on the Department of Children and Families website.

Heart Gallery organizers hope that when you see these children's faces, you will be moved to fulfill their dreams of a family to call their own.

For more information, call (860) 550-6582. To see the children currently in the gallery, visit www.ctfosteradopt.com/fosteradopt/cwp/view.asp?a=3795&Q=449608.



NATALIE, ADRICK, NADIA
Fated to be a family

Fate. That's what George and Becky Perduta credit for the addition of siblings Natalie, 15, Adrick, 14 and Nadia, 13, to their already large family in Kensington.

Fate ... and a sharp-eyed caseworker at the Connecticut Department of Children and Families.

The three kids' images were posted on the DCF's Heart Gallery. While temporarily assigned to the case, the DCF employee, whom the couple knows, noticed the familial connection to the Perdutas' adopted daughter Mayleen, now 17. "She asked us, did we realize there were siblings out there for Mayleen? It was kind of like fate," Becky said.

The Perdutas, long-time foster parents, were stunned to discover that the biracial siblings were Mayleen's half-sisters and half-brother. They decided to take "a leap of faith" and bring all four children together as a family, Becky said.

"We thought the siblings' connection would be essential for them for the rest of their lives. We wanted to ensure they had a sense of permanency, not just ... a home for six months or a year," George added, explaining why the couple later adopted them.

After the threesome and Mayleen met, "they realized they had [once] lived on the same street ... but didn't know each other."

Although the children were severely neglected in the past and missed a lot of school, they don't seem to have any enduring emotional issues, Becky said. All three have asthma and Adrick is in a Special Education program for his learning challenges.

Today, the couple has nine children – seven adopted kids from six to 17 years old, and a biological son and daughter, 25 and 26.

Becky said the social worker's excellent instincts "resulted in a forever family for the kids. We will be eternally grateful to her for helping us grow our family."

And all is well that ends well. "They are some of the most grateful kids that we've come across," Becky said. "They are really happy to have a big family. They have found a home."

The Heart Gallery



JORDAN
In sickness and health

Finding the right family for Jordan was the most vital thing that DCF has done for his family, Daniel Vega says.

Jordan, who has spina bifida, “needed a family to love him and parents who understood his crucial needs,” said the Milford man, who with his wife Lorreen adopted the nine-year-old in early 2011, when the boy was 6. The couple was introduced to him through the Heart Gallery.

Just six months after Jordan first came to live with the Vegas in 2007, his health “literally fell apart,” Lorreen said.

“He almost died in hospital,” before recovering, Daniel said. “You don’t know how much love you have for a person until you think you’ll lose him.”

In his young life, Jordan – who also takes very strong medicine to counteract epileptic seizures – has already endured 11 surgeries. Although the worry and the responsibility might have been too much for some families, the Vegas – whose blended family also includes five older biological children aged 15 to 20 – didn’t surrender in the face of Jordan’s health issues. Since their son Christian, 16, also has spina bifida, they had some knowledge of what to expect.

However, when the couple did struggle with pressures unrelated to Jordan’s medical condition and separated for a time, Lorreen was reluctant to express their “turmoil” to DCF, fearing the reaction. But ultimately, “we said, ‘We are struggling,’” she said. DCF responded by sending counselors, who outlined the Vegas’ strong and weak points as adoptive parents. This helped them to gain perspective and bolstered their self-confidence and coping skills.

DCF purchased a wheelchair ramp-equipped minivan for them, constructed a wheelchair-accessible ramp and sidewalk around their home,

assisted with their food needs, offered financial support, and even accompanied them on every hospital visit. “Lorreen and I were willing to adopt Jordan regardless of his disabilities,” his father said. And DCF was “there to assist us in every moment.” But most importantly, “Jordan opened his heart and adopted us as his forever family.”

Despite some stormy weather, the Vega family is now doing well. Daniel and Lorreen have bridged their differences, their children have all pitched in, and Jordan has been “the cement that bonded the family.”

“We cannot say enough good things about DCF, how they partnered with us with Jordan,” Daniel said. “They’ve been amazing,” his wife agreed.



ANGELINA, JOSEPH
Twice blessed

Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans. That well-known comment springs to mind when speaking with Ellen and Andrew, a couple from New London County, who – to their own surprise – adopted fraternal twins Angelina and Joseph, now 13 years old, in August 2011.

“When we married eight years ago, we said, ‘We want kids someday.’ But the timing was never right and I didn’t want to have a baby past the age of 40,” Ellen said.

But that carefully composed picture changed unexpectedly when the couple met Angie and Joey while Ellen, who works for DCF in computer tech support, photographed the siblings for the Heart Gallery.

“I’m kind of awkward by nature with kids,” said Andrew, who also worked on that photo shoot. “With these kids, I felt like they were naturally

The Heart Gallery

ours.” Ellen agreed. “It felt very comfortable,” she said. “We clicked right away. It was like a bond was there.”

But with a history of being neglected and abused and shunted to various foster homes since they were three years old, the youngsters were emotionally traumatized, she said. Fortunately, DCF provided the children with “adjustment therapy,” which helped them adjust to their new, adoptive family, Ellen said.

Meanwhile, the couple learned valuable insights from parenting classes offered by the department, which also organized foster/adoptive family events, such as fishing and swimming outings. These helped to cement the bonds between the parents and their children, while helping the twins to feel more normal.

Similarly, an adoptive support group for parents has helped Andrew and Ellen connect with other adoptive couples. “It helps us because no one can really relate unless they’ve been there,” she said.

The most useful therapy of all, Andrew said, came from another source. DCF directed the couple to a contracted provider that offers treatment, support and education for children, adolescents and families affected by trauma and attachment issues.

Today, despite some challenges, Angie and Joey are pretty “normal kids, getting on the school bus with their friends and going to school dances,” Ellen said.

Adopting the children “changed our lives ... for the better,” she said. “I have grown as a person. Our marriage is stronger. We love them.”

PHOEBE

An instant connection

Almost from the moment that the Fontaines saw teenager Phoebe’s photograph and profile on the Heart Gallery, “it seemed she would fit perfectly into our home,” said Stuart Fontaine II, who resides with wife Kimberley in East Hampton.

Time has borne out the Fontaines’ initial impression of Phoebe, 14, who was adopted into a household that includes the couple’s two sons, Dylan, 24 years old and Cody, 22 years old, and daughters Rachel, 15 and Lindsey, 8. Stuart and Kimberley have also fostered another boy, Daniel, who’s now 19.

“It’s a match made in heaven,” Stuart said of the

latest family addition. “A lot of the interests she had fit right in with us,” Kimberley said. Those interests include horseback riding, camping, animals and nature.

But Phoebe came from a troubled background. “She was abused by a parental figure and had difficulty trusting others,” Stuart said. And in foster care, Phoebe was moved six times, said Kimberley.

Due to her emotional trauma, the girl continually had stomach issues that required medical care, sometimes in emergency rooms. Thankfully, however, DCF “provided immense support” to help Phoebe recover and to lead a normal life. “From day one, they’ve been fantastic,” an appreciative Kimberley said.

Not only has the department paid for all of the girl’s conventional medical expenses, but also for trauma-based behavioral therapy that helped Phoebe to find an emotional calm.

DCF social workers who care deeply for Phoebe established emotional bonds with the girl that have also been key to her recovery. The Fontaines themselves benefited from DCF-required parenting classes. The department even paid for Phoebe’s summer camp and for the dental braces that will ensure that her smile matches her new and positive outlook on life.

“I felt there was a lot of worry and ... stress,” Phoebe said of her former life. “But now, I feel a little bit more safe. I feel like I’m a better person than I used to be,” said the teen, who is earning top marks in school and has made the honor roll.

Phoebe is “an awesome kid,” who has “experienced something that children never should,” Kimberley said. “These kids have been through a lot. They need our help.”

“Not all kids in foster care are what society has portrayed them to be,” said her new sister Rachel. “A lot of kids like Phoebe just want to be loved.”



Learn how you can become an adoptive parent through DCF by calling 1-888-KID-HERO or logging onto the DCF website at www.ctfosteradopt.com.