A rainbow with no rain doesn’t tell the whole story, and art that tells the stories of foster youth has to include a few raindrops. That was the clear message sent by the YAP board (Youth Adult Partnership) when working with an artist to design a mural that welcomes visitors to the new home of the Department’s Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) at 675 Hegenberger Road in Oakland.

Artist Steven Jay Carter, an accomplished Washington D.C. painter with much mural experience, was responsive to the feedback the former foster youth provided. The YAP board collaborated with Carter for over five months last year on the mural’s design and throughout the drafting and painting process.

In order to help Carter understand their objection to presenting the ILSP experience as all rainbows and sunshine, the youth members of the board also worked to gradually help him understand the “mission and concept” of the foster youth experience and ILSP program, board member Ralph Hall explained.

On our first conference call, however, there was no holding back. The youth let Carter know, respectfully and right away, that his original proposal did not fit with their vision.

“We all jumped in saying ‘fix this’ or ‘this isn’t what we meant,’ “ YAP member Sarita “RiRi” Wilson remembered.

“We needed the contrast,” added YAP member Elliot Allen. “Not strictly the positive but showing how to get to the positive. We wanted the story behind and not just the end result.”

By the end of September 2009, after ten months as a blank wall, the colorful ILSP mural was the end result of the YAP members collaboration with Carter. Soon, DCFS staff started to stop and study the words and pictures. Teenagers began saying they would have wanted to be part of the project. ILSP’s youngest visitors quickly gave into the temptation to touch the 3-D oversized raindrops and tree in the center.

During his visits to Oakland he impressed them with his willingness to both understand their experiences growing up in and emancipating from foster care, and then reflect their stories in the mural. “(Carter) was open to suggestions,” Hall, a published poet said. “He dug deep and immersed himself in our world.”

(continued on page 6)
Dear Colleagues, Resource Families, and Community Partners:

At DCFS, we’re looking forward to the start of a new decade. 2010 promises to be a year filled with exciting new opportunities. As we’ve announced in the past, we are investing in a number of strategies to meet the DCFS mission that all children in Alameda County will have the opportunity to grow and develop in a safe, healthy, nurturing, and stable home. For example, we are offering subsidized child care for our county licensed foster homes with children ages 0-6, a visitation center for our birth parents and relatives, and increased parent and youth advocates. We’re eager to see how this new year unfolds with these additional support structures in place.

Also, in the coming year, we are continuing our intensive work to address Racial Disproportionality throughout the foster care system. Over the past nine months, DCFS has been testing a variety of strategies in the very early stages of involvement with our Department. We have tested some new strategies and continue to brainstorm ideas of how we can make sure we are gathering the most relevant information possible to inform the variety of decisions our staff engage in after someone refers a family to us. Stay tuned for education and training opportunities in the coming months.

Carol Collins, Assistant Agency Director

“Understand that the right to choose your own path is a sacred privilege. Use it. Dwell in possibility”.
— Oprah Winfred

DCFS was one of 3 pilot California counties participating in the Model Standards Project (MSP), which focused on improving our care of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) foster youth. Although the MSP Initiative ended in 2009, our work continues. The MSP workgroup was recently renamed the “LGBTQ Workgroup”. It will continue to focus on the needs of children and youth in care, and it will now also include improving our work with LGBT foster and adoptive parents. New members are welcome. Contact the LGBTQ Workgroup Chair Fredi Juni junifx@acgov.org for more information.

Group Home Placements

Did you know that there are 185 Alameda County foster youth placed in group homes? Many of those youth have been in care far too long and are in dire need of a loving family home that will provide them with a lifelong connection, while helping them prepare for adulthood. Most of the youth are African American (72%) and male (52%).

Alameda County continues to utilize specialized programs while helping these youth transition to family homes, but needs the community to reach out to those youth most in need. For information on foster parenting and adoptions in Alameda County, please call (510) 259-3575 or visit http://www.pathwaytohome.org.

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Carol’s Column

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Please provide comments and feedback regarding DCFS Press to Connie Linas at linasc@acgov.org

Contact the LGBTQ Workgroup Chair Fredi Juni junifx@acgov.org for more information.
In 2009, several DCFS Managers, Alameda County Child Abuse Prevention Council and Adopt an Angel program organizers created an awesome season of giving. They worked collaboratively to stock and restock the Department’s Toy Store with toys and items for children ages 0-11. Gift cards were distributed to youth ages 12 and up, and individual gift requests were fulfilled for over 200 youth in group home care.

This year’s giving was particularly generous despite the economic downturn in our country. Our youth in foster care were provided a wide variety of quality gifts, such as Fisher Price button and zipper dolls, animal and insect hand puppets, educational toys, board games, building sets, drawing and craft sets, and wonderful discovery toys and soft plush animals. Older youth were provided a range of wonderful items they requested, including bicycles, ipods, coats, jackets and hat and glove sets, CD players, bath product gift sets, and household items like pots/pan, dishes, flatware, comforters and sheet sets, and bath towels.

So how does this happen? There are a number of wonderful people both within DCFS and in the local community who take on this task. Some write letters to businesses or reach out personally to their family, friends and contacts, while others coordinate with local businesses, service groups and solicit volunteers to help shop for gifts, wrap them in holiday paper and organize them for pick up.

This effort takes an enormous amount of organization, communication, and coordination and there are MANY to thank. However, perhaps the greatest reward is knowing that the hearts of our children and youth in care were filled with joy this holiday season as they opened their wonderful gifts.

On the evening of Thursday, December 10, 2009, the Alameda County Foster Parent Association hosted its annual Holiday Party from 5 – 9 p.m. at the Marina Community Center in San Leandro.

From all accounts a good time was had by all. Invited guests included children and youth of all ages, foster parents, relative caregivers, fictive kin, adoptive parents, Faith Advisory Council members, community members and DCFS staff and consultants. Delicious treats were provided. In addition, there was a host of entertainment consisting of crafts, face painting, and a wonderful presentation by the Prescott Circus Theater. Youth performed amazing juggling acts while standing on stilts. Another wonderful highlight of the evening was the Bicycle Raffle. A gentleman known as “Lucky” donated 15 refurbished bicycles to the raffle and excitement filled the room as each winning number was called.

As the evening progressed and children giggled, guests shared stories and warm wishes for the season. Holiday music filled the air and the spirit of the holidays was apparent. The final event of the evening was the gift distribution. Volunteers from Kohl’s Department Store and the Faith Advisory Council distributed recycled shopping bag pouches to all caregivers. Children received toys and stuffed animals and older youth received gift cards. The gifts were donated by the Helping Hands Organization and Adopt an Angel.

The Alameda County Foster Parent Association was pleased to have such an enjoyable and well attended Holiday Party. The Association looks forward to a new year of providing support and training to Alameda County Foster Parents. For more information about becoming a member of the Alameda County Foster Parent Association please call (510) 430-0942.
Christon entered foster care in 2003 at age eleven, and was placed in a foster home. In 2005 he moved to a group home and a plan of adoption seemed highly unlikely. However, the Department’s work on Youth Permanency has challenged that belief.

In June 2007, Christon was referred to the Dumisha Jamaa Project, one of the Department’s Youth Permanency Projects. Christon told his Dumisha permanency worker from the beginning that his desire was to be adopted. He shared his openness to considering a family of any race. Christon was the star drummer in a band and was a top football and track and field athlete. A profile describing him, his interests, and his desires was placed on the California Kids Connection website.

In March 2009, he was invited to an older youth matching event sponsored by the project. Christon was very ambivalent about attending, stating that it was a “weird” way to meet a family. Nevertheless, he decided to attend the event which was a Pizza Party/Warrior Basketball Game. Christon participated in an interactive scavenger hunt and met the Flores family.

They really connected, and the Floreses later expressed their strong interest in being considered for placement for Christon. After a series of meetings, disclosures and phone conferences, Christon was told about their desire to blend their families together and adopt him. Christon’s response was, “I never knew how my life could change in one day!” In September 2009, after preplacement visits and overnights, 16 year old Christon moved in. So far, so good! Christon and the Floreses are blending their families together with lots of ongoing support from staff and their other family members. The plan is to complete an adoption in late 2010.

One Youth’s Journey to Permanence

One mother was all smiles and spoke openly and honestly about her determination to reunify with her two children. Today, her young sons sat on either side of her at the Celebration.

The first DCFS Reunification Celebration was in September 2006. Our next event is scheduled for April 21, 2010 at 10:30 a.m., at the Buttercup Kitchen Restaurant in Oakland. Department staff are welcome to attend and for more information please contact Cindy Rinker, Program Manager, at 510-268-2342.

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Assistant Agency Director Carol Collins opened the program and acknowledged the inspirational stories of the families, their commitment to reunifying with their children, working with the Department and the crucial work of the Child Welfare Workers. The event highlighted the accomplishments, personal struggles and stories of each family including a single father who worked as a team with his son’s foster parent during the reunification process.

CELEBRATING FAMILY REUNIFICATION

The Family Reunification and Family Preservation programs hosted their quarterly Family Reunification (FR) Celebration to acknowledge the successful reunification on January 20, 2010, at the Buttercup Kitchen Restaurant in Oakland. The FR Celebration was very well attended with over 50 people including six families who have successfully reunified, their extended family members and friends as well as Department staff.

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Philip had never spent as much time as he wanted to with his 7 year old son, Marcel. Over the last decade, Philip had struggled with substance abuse that had relentlessly affected his employment, housing and a stable relationship with his young son. After the death of Marcel’s mother in 2006, Marcel went to live with Philip in Hayward. The transition for father and son was doomed from the start. Philip’s persistent drug use and inevitable encounters with law enforcement impaired his ability to protect and nurture his son.

Philip and Marcel came to the attention of DCFS, and ultimately a Family Maintenance case plan was developed to help Philip address his behaviors associated with his substance abuse. Philip was motivated to enter treatment and cultivate his relationship with his son. Family strengths included Philip’s acceptance and understanding of the gravity of his addiction, his openness to participating in the case plan, attending therapy and parenting classes, and his commitment to stability and their strength as a family unit—which is seen in Philip’s and Marcel’s attachment to each other. The P2S Family Advocate worked closely with the DCFS CWW, and the areas targeted included counseling and substance abuse treatment for Philip, individual and family therapy, housing search assistance, supporting Philip with updating his resume and connecting with employment resources.

After completing his case plan goals, Philip and Marcel found an apartment in San Leandro. Philip maintains his sobriety and works two part-time jobs. And, during all of the ongoing healing and after the demands of single parenthood, he makes it a priority to read to his son, every night. They enjoy playing basketball in their free time. Philip recently made an unannounced visit to his Paths 2 Success Agency to thank his Family Advocate, again, and tell her that 2009 was the best year of his life, as he has fallen in love with his son all over again.

*(To maintain confidentiality of our clients, names have been changed.)*

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Lola Holoman has been an Alameda County foster parent and CARI foster parent for over 26 years. She has also worked for 20 years at an Oakland child development center. Although she moved to Sacramento a few years ago, Lola still considers Oakland home. She now commutes to Oakland several times a week to work as a Church Administrator at the Lily of the Valley Christian Center, which has been her church for many years. Lola spearheads the church’s foster parent recruitment efforts, and is a strong, committed member of the Alameda County Faith Initiative.

Lola’s love of children led her to become a foster parent. She adopted the first foster child she cared for, Brandon, who is now 26, when he was 6 years old. And many years ago, Lola became legal guardian to three girls—2 sisters Fretea and Carmen, and Desjonna. Although the plan for them was originally adoption, it was changed to guardianship. Lola made a difficult decision to not pursue adoption due to the close relationship the 2 sisters had with their grandmother, and the grandmother’s objections to adoption at the time. Over the years, Lola supported the family relationship. However, as all of the girls got older they began to state their strong desire to be adopted by Lola—they wanted to be Holomans! Lola asked for the Juvenile Court to reinstate their dependency, and change their permanent plans to adoption. On a long anticipated day in November 2009, they were adopted at our 10th Annual Adoption Day. Fretea was 19, Carmen was 18, and DesJonna was 14.

Jamela, who was also raised by Lola, turned 18 before an adoption could be completed. She is now 21, and will be adopted by Lola through an adult adoption this year.

Lola shared that many of her former foster children have been adopted by members of her church community. Her adult daughter, also an Alameda County foster parent, has adopted two children as well. Lola is an inspirational role model for her family, and for all of us!
ILSP Mural

(continued from front page)

“He asked more questions and made sure our vision was there,” added Allen, who collaborates with Wilson on “digital stories,” videos set to music to make ILSP programs more accessible to participants.

“(The words on the raindrops) are everything I’ve been through, hurt, pain, neglect, homelessness,” Wilson said, reading some of the words inscribed in capital letters on the raindrops.

Like the raindrops, and the rainbow and the 3-D tree with roots at the center of the mural both have words etched in. The roots have the words that define for a foster youth’s path to success (healthy relationships and strong bonds, for example) and the rainbow has contrasting terms (Ward of the Court to Permanency.)

The rainbow that dominates the mural and the college flags of ILSP alums on the bottom right side remain from Carter’s first draft. But the board believed more than just the college flags should be included on the sunshine side in order to better reflect the true diversity of the ILSP experience.

Next to the blue graduation cap and tassel the Stanford flag wears a yellow hard hat. The silhouettes include a chef, hairdresser, examples of “positive professions” Hall explained.

“I’ve been in group homes. I’ve been homeless,” Wilson said. “You can grow from all that and get somewhere and be the ‘Best and the Brightest’,” she said, looking down at the young people painted below the college flags with the ‘Best and Brightest’ written beneath them.

Hall agreed. “The left (raindrop) side is common for us. It’s unfortunate that it is. The right side is brighter and it could be us, if we continue to come into this building.”

YAP members Ralph Hall, Sarita “RiRi” Wilson and Elliott Allen.

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