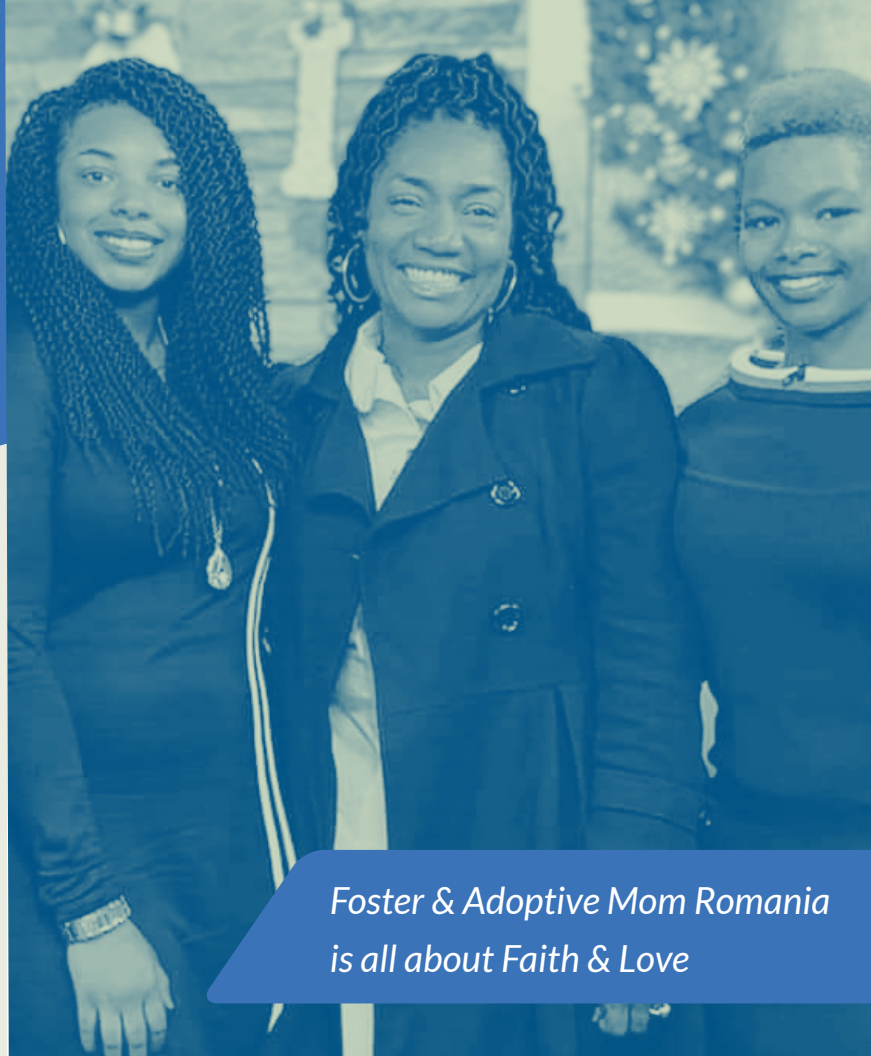


UMFS CHAMPION

Spring 2021

“FAMILY
is the people God
connects you with. **”**



*Foster & Adoptive Mom Romania
is all about Faith & Love*

"FOSTERING &



*Romania (right)
and Devita*

The ice cream truck that frequents Romania Whitehurst's neighborhood pulled onto her street around 7 p.m. Right on cue, two children in her home came calling. Romania chuckled as they ran to her and politely requested money.

"Go get my purse," she said lovingly to 7-year-old Kahlen and 9-year-old Deshawn, whom she cares for as if they were her own. Romania then paused. "Oh, you know what? I don't have any cash. You'll have to ask Devita." Without delay, the boys hurried off. After all, there's no time to spare when you're on a quest for push-pops and ice cream sandwiches.

But satisfying as they are, treats on an ice cream truck are nowhere near as sweet as Romania's unconditional love. "This is her heart's desire," said Vineta Watson, Adoption Care Coordinator at the UMFS Tidewater office. "Fostering and adopting is Romania's calling."

ADOPTING IS ROMANIA'S CALLING."

Romania's opened her heart and home to more than a dozen youth in foster care, as well as to others who weren't in care. "Some of them have stories that will make you shudder," Romania said. "But you can't just read the black and white on a child. You really have to get to know those kids and peel back the layers."

"Romania was all in 100 percent from day one."

So that's what Romania does. She forges meaningful and lasting relationships, and her efforts were vital to the successful adoption of two daughters from the UMFS Treatment Foster Care program. "Those girls had been through a lot, and they put Romania through a lot," Vineta said of Na'diya (21) and Shenika (22), both of whom were teenagers when Romania met them.

Shenika remembers it well. "It was January 27, 2014," Shenika said of the day she moved in with Romania. "From then and there, every day wasn't easy, but every day was progress."

"It was a blessing," she continued. "Instead of throwing in the towel, she loved me harder, and she opened her arms wider."

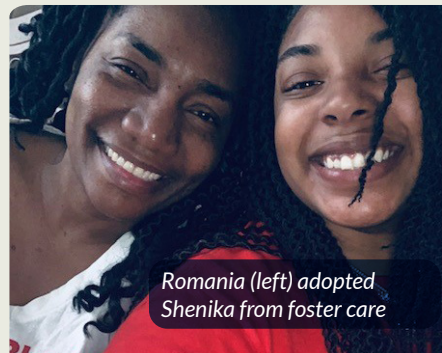
Mary Davies, LCSW, is the UMFS Community Based Services Supervisor in Tidewater. She knew from the start that Romania would make a tremendous impact on Na'diya and Shenika. "Romania was all in 100 percent from day one," Mary said. Na'Diya and Shenika have thrived as part of Romania's family, which includes her biological

daughter, Vanessa (27); Deshawn (who's been in Romania's care since 4 weeks old); and Kahlen, who recently came into Romania's home with his mother, Devita (28).

Romania met Devita in the community and said she's considering making the relationship more permanent. "Did you know there are adult adoptions," Romania asked, proving again that her home's a sanctuary, love knows no bounds, and age is just a number. "Oh, they're all my babies," she said.

"Instead of throwing in the towel, she loved me harder, and she opened her arms wider."

"Romania has a way of just being so genuine, so nurturing, so caring," Mary said. "But she's also real. Romania's not afraid to say no ... but she does it with such love and such grace." Said Vineta. "The great thing about Romania is that she truly believes in what she does. She has a love for people, and she's passionate and strong." And it was at a young age that Romania realized her strength. When she was 12, her mother passed away. Romania spent the next few years living with relatives and family friends.



**Romania (left) adopted
Shenika from foster care**



From left: Mary, Vineta, Romania, and Na'diya appeared together in 2019 on the radio show "Another View" with host Barbara Hamm Lee.

She never officially entered foster care, but her experiences were similar. "I didn't know a lot of the houses I went to, so I can relate to these babies in foster care." Shenika agreed. "We have so much in common," she said, citing the loss of her own mother. "It felt like a part of me was missing when my mom passed, but Romania was there through the whole process."

Yes, Romania's experiences informed her sincere desire to help young people, but there's a higher power leading the way. "I can't take credit for any of it," Romania said. "Through the hurt of losing my mother, I learned that family is the people God connects you with."

The sentiment resonates with Shenika. "Romania may not be my biological mom," Shenika said. "But that is my mother, and I wouldn't be the person I am today without her." ●

*You can join Romania and make a difference in the lives of young people in foster care. Visit **UMFS.org/foster** to learn more about becoming a foster or adoptive parent, or make a donation at **UMFS.org/donate**.*



WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Volunteer to be a UMFS
Family Champion today

We're excited to share a new volunteer opportunity for 2021: **the UMFS Family Champion.**

UMFS Family Champions provide support for the children, teens, and families at UMFS in a number of ways. Family Champions help provide meals and treats, collect critical items, and help celebrate birthdays and special moments for the kids and families at UMFS.

What does this role look like? As a Family Champion you'll be placed on an email list with other like-minded and passionate UMFS volunteers in your local community. The UMFS volunteer manager will email the group when a need arises in your community. Depending on the needs and the time of year, you could receive an email anywhere from weekly to monthly.

In addition to the meals and tangible items that our Family Champions provide, you give our families and staff the reassurance that there is a community behind them, supporting and encouraging them always, which is such a powerful gift.

To learn more about becoming
a UMFS Family Champion,
visit **[UMFS.org/volunteer](https://umfs.org/volunteer)**.