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# Atlanta

## MAGAZINE

## State of Independents: The Orange Duffel Bag Initiative



For foster and homeless teens, a nonprofit is doing what the state of Georgia cannot: helping them grow up

December 3, 2014 | [Betsy Riley](#) | [Add a comment](#)

### It all starts with the kids' stories:

Sammy's biological mom, a crack addict, gave him up when he was 10 months old. He later ended up selling drugs to help his adoptive family avoid eviction, again. Sofia's parents were deported, and the Division of Children and Family Services shuttled her through nine different high schools. Charlotte's father is wanted by authorities in three countries. Her stepdad abused her, and she hasn't seen her little brother in months.



Illustration by Shout

Teenagers falling through the cracks of state systems designed to protect them—foster care, schools, shelters, juvenile justice—have all faced heartbreaks, and there's no shortage of adults telling them how to fix their problems. But one Atlanta nonprofit has found that the best way to help these kids is to listen to their stories.

The Orange Duffel Bag Initiative offers a sort of life coaching for “at risk” teens like the group alums above.\* Each 12-week session begins with a daylong retreat, culminating in an exercise where kids select images from a pile of photographs and explain why those pictures symbolize their lives.

Sammy chose an astronaut floating off into space; Sofia chose a baby's hand being held by an adult.

Most Orange Duffel Bag participants sign up to earn the free laptops distributed at the end. But if you ask a graduate what turned out to be most meaningful about the program, they almost universally tell you: "Finding out other people have it worse than me, that I am not alone."

Telling stories is a key discovered by Sam Bracken, a Franklin Covey executive who helped launch the organization in 2010. A former linebacker at Georgia Tech, Bracken found power in talking about his own troubled childhood surrounded by mobsters, drug addicts, and biker gangs in Las Vegas. He chose the orange duffel bag as a symbol of hope because he carried one to college.

Orange Duffel Bag classes follow a curriculum inspired by seven "rules of the road" outlined in Bracken's biography, written with cofounder Echo Garrett. The organization has conducted dozens of classes in six Georgia counties, added programs for college students, and honored more than 400 graduates. This year, it received the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Service Award from Emory's Rollins School of Public Health and the Goizueta Business School.

Through journaling and weekly meetings, participants aim to identify their passions, find their dreams, and create plans for their futures. These teens haven't had the luxury of debating such questions over family dinners—let alone helicopter parents taking them on cross-country college tours.

As de facto guardian, the state of Georgia provides shelter, clothing, education, and even post-secondary tuition. But if DFCS sometimes fails young children, its inherent shortcomings become even more glaring as kids grow older. Georgia DFCS cares for some 8,620 children. More than 3,000 juveniles age 14 and up are eligible for aid, though they can declare independence at age 18. Studies show that among those who sign themselves out of care, less than 20 percent will earn high school diplomas, nearly 40 percent will become homeless, and almost 60 percent of boys will commit crimes.

If kids stay in care, Georgia will provide for them until age 21. In the school year ending in 2012, DFCS saw 473 youth enter post-secondary education. But that number dropped to 316 in 2013 and 313 in 2014. The numbers of students who graduated were 19, 35, and 15, respectively.

In March, Governor Nathan Deal formed the Child Welfare Reform Council to study DFCS overhaul—similar to previous councils that outlined successful juvenile and criminal justice reforms. Youth services have been largely ignored in the media uproar over child deaths and agency privatization. But even if the council does address deficiencies for older children—and there are many—the state will never be an adequate parent of teens. By its very nature, adolescence entails flexibility, spontaneity, rebellion, and risk-taking, none of which lend themselves to a bureaucracy.

Fortunately, as "Team Orange" proves, one adult who stops to listen can change the course of a teen's life.

"What we do is coaching, not teaching," says Bracken. "We assume the

answer is within each kid. All we have to do is draw it out. It's Socratic."



Photograph by Ben Rollins

### **Dedrick Leonard**

*Last spring, Dedrick Leonard, 20, graduated with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree, which he earned through dual enrollment. He entered West Georgia College this fall as a sophomore. A spokesman for Orange Duffel Bag, he has made presentations to donors, at statewide conferences, and even before the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee.*

My dad has something like 14 kids. To him, I'm just another number. I grew up with a single mom and my

older brother and sister. We were like the Three Stooges, always together. We used to love to sing hymns in the bathroom. Our favorite was "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

Mom never had a nine-to-five job, and she had a giant anger problem. She beat my sister, and she would call the police on my brother and me all the time, even if she'd just lost a pair of socks. One day, when I was about 14, an officer handed me an eviction notice.

I didn't tell my mom because I wanted to teach her a lesson about what happens when you don't take care of your family. I didn't know it was going to take me down the line of being homeless, sexually abused, in a psychiatric ward, and in foster care.

I finally landed in a group home. The director, Jennifer Keeling, is a ball of fire. She enrolled me in what she called an empowerment program, which turned out to be Orange Duffel Bag. It was the first time anyone dared me to confront my past. At the end, they asked me to talk in front of some donors. I had always been shy, but I discovered public speaking came easy.

I just found my voice. One of the directors told me I needed to be on somebody's stage. If my coach hadn't picked me that day, I wouldn't be the Dedrick Leonard that people know today.

### **Chinasa Enujioké**

*Chinasa Enujioké, 21, is a junior biology major at Georgia State University, where she attended one of Orange Duffel Bag's college-level courses. She hopes to become a pediatrician.*

I was born in Nigeria. My dad was a truck driver, and my mom had a small clothing business. When I was five, my little sister and I got into bed with our parents one night because it was cold. I was lying next to my mom, but it was still cold. I told Dad that Mom wouldn't get up. She had died. Then my dad

died in a car accident when I was eight.

My uncle in Atlanta adopted us. We were so happy we were going to a new life. I went to North Springs High School. A friend recommended that I read a series of vampire books, but my uncle found them and thought they were evil. He said I was disrespectful and asked me to leave his house. I got a job at Publix and stayed with friends.

I had a 3.5 GPA and was accepted at Georgia State.



Photograph by Ben Rollins

At orientation, I was lost. I cried all day long.

Everybody had come with somebody else, and I was there all by myself. The parents were so proud of their kids. I thought, “Oh my God, I don’t know what I’m doing. What am I doing here?” They had registered me as an out-of-state student and said I owed \$4,000. I got sent from department to department to department.

Last fall, I was homeless again, and the *GSU Signal* interviewed me. Afterward, I got Facebook messages from many other students, especially those staying at night shelters. We didn’t have anyone to help us. Orange Duffel Bag gave me people to talk to.

I didn’t feel so lonely. The coach cares for you so much that you start caring about yourself.



Photograph by Ben Rollins

### **Michael Daly**

*Michael Daly, 51, a former business consultant and travel executive, is president and cofounder of the Orange Duffel Bag Initiative.*

I put myself through Georgia State waiting tables, but I found my niche in sales. As business development director, I helped a travel company grow from \$30 million to \$200 million and expand overseas. One day I spoke

to a publishing group and met Echo Garrett, who told me about the book she was writing with Sam Bracken. I joined Sam, Echo, and Diana Black (now our

vice president) to form ODB. After two years, I came on board full time as president.

I kept reading that the dropout rate of students in foster care and Title I schools was over 50 percent, and I thought, how could we let that happen as a society? These kids are our future. This isn't the Department of Human Service's fault. These are our kids. We can do better.

There were all these existing opportunities and services for kids who were homeless or in foster care, but the students weren't connected to them. The kids have to be connected to themselves first. Then the system works because the student has *chosen* to make it work. But they can't do that until they address their back stories. Get a young person on the right path, and they'll fly.

### **Vitaly Wickson**

*Vitaly Wickson, 19, graduated from high school in October. He plans to attend trade school and become an automotive engineer.*

I was born in Russia, but I am the only member of my biological family who is still alive. I came to the United States at age 11, when I was adopted by a couple in Roswell. But by age 15, I was living in foster care group homes. My weight got up to 290 pounds, and I was making straight Fs.



**Photograph by Ben Rollins**

I got tired of being made fun of, so I decided to study hard and work out every day. I became a cross-country athlete, and I graduated from high school with a 3.4. I have wanted to be a mechanic since I was six years old.

Orange Duffel Bag helped me know *me* better. I have always wanted to make the people around me happier, and I didn't care about how I felt. Orange Duffel Bag helped me know my inner self. And when you find out everybody else has gone through the same as you, maybe worse, it makes you feel you are not alone. It's not that I want somebody to go through hard times, but at least we can help each other.

Before, I would pick and choose who to share my stories with. I didn't like therapists. I felt like everybody was out to hurt me. But Orange Duffel Bag showed me people actually do want to help. I thought Sam Bracken's story was made up. But after he visited our class, I saw it was real. I was on the edge of dropping out so many times. The day I graduated, I went home and cried.





Photograph by Ben Rollins

## Sandra LeMieux

*“Coach Sandy” LeMieux, 51, has been leading both high school and college classes for Orange Duffel Bag for nearly three years. An accredited life coach (as are all of the program’s teachers), she was formerly an executive with several Fortune 500 companies.*

My mom put me in foster care when I was three years old. My brother was two, and my sister was eight and a half months. Mom told me that I had to

be the big girl now and take care of them.

In foster care, I couldn’t get the adults to listen to me. I was being abused, but they didn’t believe me because I drew a pretty picture for the shrink. I was proud of my picture. I was a perfectionist.

Later we moved back with our mom. I had Social Security and veterans benefits from my dad, who had passed away. But the checks were mailed to Mom, and she would forge my name and spend the money. One time, I walked 15 miles to DFCS to ask for a “divorce” from my mother. They told me they were in the business of keeping families together. So I could either send my mother to jail or pay bills myself. I dropped out and worked two jobs. At age 20, I had my daughter. Brittany changed my life.

My past gives me a lot of compassion for these kids. I know you can’t let your story define you. I love helping them see who they really are and believe they have the power to share that with the world. It’s so fun to see the possibility in their eyes. They’re sitting there glazed over, and you can tell the second one of them shifts. You can just see it.

**Christen Gray**

*Christen Gray, 19, graduates from high school this month. She plans to learn bookkeeping through the federal Job Corps for a few years before entering college to study small-business administration. Her son Ja'Kobe is three years old.*

I was just a little kid when I got knocked up. I was in labor for two days, and I had three epidurals. Then they rushed me into an emergency C-section. Halfway through, I flatlined. I woke up to my mother praying in my ear. When I hear kids thinking it's cool to be pregnant, I tell them what I went through.



After my son was born, I just lost who I was. I knew I could use all the advice I could get, so I signed up for Orange Duffel Bag. A few weeks in, I snapped at school, and the principal kicked me out.

We had a little book to do journal entries. It made me sit down and map out my life. There are tear stains on the pages. Coach Sandy understood, and she just hugged me. I was surprised to hear my classmates' stories. If they can still fight, then I can still fight. The assistant principal came to our graduation and saw I was trying to make some improvements. She gave me another chance, and it worked.

*\*Real stories, but not real names*

*This article originally appeared in our December 2014 issue.*

**TAGS: FOSTER TEENS, ORANGE DUFFEL BAG INITIATIVE**

# The Orange Duffel Bag Initiative (ODBI) - Overview and Summary

**OUR STUDENT SUCCESS:** ODBI helps empower high school and college students toward their education success and inner greatness! **ODBI, a 501(c)(3) public charity, has served 1000+ students who are academically and economically at-risk, providing them evidence and trauma-informed programs and a proven methodology of certified executive-level coaching and ongoing advocacy.** ODBI programs are a human investment in the lives of these students, offering them a pathway out of poverty through self-exploration, access to technology and a focus on education success. **Our student outcomes show improved: self-advocacy, self-reliance, critical thinking, education and employment outcomes, community involvement and stable relationships.**

**OUR STUDENT NEED:** Our country has 1.2 million certified homeless k-12 students. 50,000+ of them reside in GA; 3000+ are high school juniors and seniors. Greater Atlanta has 7000+ homeless k-12 students. Georgia has 10,000+ children and young adults in foster care and teens in foster care are a decision away from being homeless. 80% age out of the system without completing high school or acquiring a GED. 50% are homeless within 6 months and unemployed. Of those who graduate high school or earn a GED, less than 2% successfully achieve a higher education degree. According to Maura McInerney, Education Law Center, **a student who drops out of high school is eight times more likely to be incarcerated and 40 times more likely to be on public assistance. The annual cost to society for each drop out is \$1.2M.**

**OUR WORK:** Since 2010, ODBI has created and delivered secondary and postsecondary coaching and advocacy programs to promote positive systemic change and help underrepresented students complete their education. **Independently evaluated program data shows that ODBI's model, curriculum and ongoing advocacy improves education achievement rates** of students who experienced foster care, high poverty or homelessness and were at significant risk of not completing their education.

**OUR COMMITMENT AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT:** ODBI is committed to delivering impactful programs and raising awareness of social injustice through networking and advocating on behalf of disadvantaged students. **Parade Magazine and Atlanta Magazine have written about the ODBI, educating the public about barriers faced by our most vulnerable students.** The ODBI has presented its outcomes and Collaboration for Collective Impact model at **7 national conferences.**

*"ODBI was great support for self-efficacy, college and career readiness. 100% of our students participating improved attendance, behavior and performance. Our students' soft skills were enhanced as well as written and oral communication. ODBI is an awesome program to extend our student's resume for success in life!"*

— E. J. Mobley Ph.D.,  
Principal, West End Academy

*"The Orange Duffel Bag program is an innovative way to engage students and encourage them to stay in school."*

— Dr. John D. Barge,  
GA DOE State School Superintendent

*"I've seen an increase in positive attitudes, improved behavior, and career/college focus. There's not only been an increase in determination to finish immediate educational goals, but also a dedication to go further than their initial plan."*

— Y. M. Davis, Gwinnett Technical College

## Honored recipient of



Emory University  
Martin Luther King Jr.  
Community Service Award

## Our Key Partners



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The ODBI is a 501(c)(3) public charity.

[www.theODBI.org](http://www.theODBI.org)

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