

"Saying that we need to invest in our children is one thing, taking action on those words is another. I hope you'll join Team Orange, a movement that's making a difference!"

- Michael Daly, ODBI President



THE ORANGE
DUFFEL
BAG INITIATIVE™

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MISSION/OVERVIEW

The Orange Duffel Bag Initiative (ODBI), a 501c3 public charity, serves academically and economically at-risk high school and college students, providing them evidence and trauma-informed programs and proven methodology of certified executive-level coaching. ODBI's programs empower students toward self-advocacy, self-reliance, and improved education and employment outcomes. ODBI's services are a human investment in the lives of at-risk students, offering each young person a pathway out of poverty through self-exploration, improved critical thinking, access to technology and a focus on education retention and completion.

FINANCIAL INTEGRITY

Four years of audited financials show 85¢ of every dollar donated to ODBI goes to our students and programs serving them.

PROVEN RESULTS/MEASURING OUR SUCCESS

ODBI is data driven. Since 2010, 700+ students have graduated ODBI's Coaching Programs across 7 counties in Georgia. ODBI's high school and college coaching programs, curriculum and evaluation model are Independent Review Board (IRB) approved with key participant outcomes achieved being: 1) improved critical thinking 2) improved attendance and GPA 3) improved self-esteem 4) reduced anger 5) improved retention and academic progress 6) graduation achievement 7) accelerated career exploration and postsecondary planning.

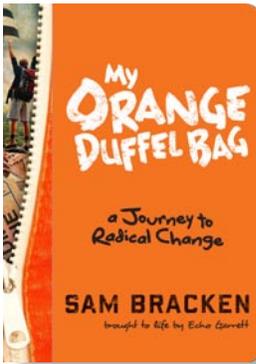
FOCUS ON EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT

ODBI provides at-risk high school and college students, at no cost to them, executive-level coaching programs and ongoing advocacy to improve their education outcomes and instill leadership qualities in its graduates. ODBI 12-Week After School Coaching Programs meet on a college campus where participants engage in group coaching (non-directive counseling delivered by executive-level life coaches) and complete classwork assignments including SMART goals. ODBI partners with the college to provide speakers based on students' needs and assessment results. Participant success is measured by class attendance, assignment and goal completion, and final presentation of their education and life plans. Participants graduate with a certificate of completion and an orange duffel bag. High school students earn a laptop, bridging the digital divide for these students. College students earn a \$200 scholarship check.

"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





WHY AN ORANGE DUFFEL BAG?

When ODBI co-founder, Sam Bracken, was a homeless teen in Nevada, he received a full-ride football scholarship to GA Tech. He packed all he owned and all his hopes and dreams in an orange duffel bag, and his life was forever changed for the better. He credits his success to education and caring adults. ODBI's Advocates provide ongoing support to our program graduates, modeling this philosophy for success. ODBI's curricula are based on Bracken's multi-award winning book *My Orange Duffel Bag: A Journey to Radical Change*.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL RECOGNITION

ODBI is a proud recipient of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Service Award from Emory University for exemplifying the precepts of social justice and The Nobis Award for Most Innovative Programs. Featured in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Parade Magazine*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Fulton Insider* and *The Atlanta Magazine*, ODBI has also presented at 6 national conferences focused on improving education resources and outcomes for underserved students.



Improving the outcomes and education success of students who are homeless, in foster care or experiencing high poverty.

TESTIMONIALS

"The ODBI class taught me how to move forward in my life and not turn back for no one. I'm now a straight-A student and have more determination to keep going on."

— M.O., Class 10

"Coaching for College Completion helps close the gap between those students who really want to succeed in college with those who are thriving as a result of their participation in the program."

— Michael Wyatt, Interim Director,
Office of Black Student Achievement,
Georgia State University

"ODBI gave me a "sense of hope."

— B.M., Class 7

"I was headed for either death or jail. Look at me now, I am making all As & Bs. I'm dual enrolled at a local technical college and plan to pursue my education as a nurse."

— K.J., Class 3

"If it wasn't for you all, I probably would have dropped out of school. But you taught me to never give up, to never let your bad side get the best of you."

— J.M., Class 6

"Since I graduated ODBI, I am a lot more at one with myself and my emotions and I am also a lot more okay with the past I've had and open to share it with others."

— R.C., Class 13

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

— Yolonda Davis,
Gwinnett Technical College

"Orange Duffel Bag's Coaching for College Completion (CCC) was phenomenal and is needed as an ongoing component for not only post secondary students, but for every student! I saw the growth and witnessed change in mindsets."

— Monique M. Faulkner,
Atlanta Technical College

"I figured out that I need to have a plan and that college is important to me."

— T.F., Class 13

"The class has been a great tribute to help release years of stored anger. Opportunities have shown themselves to me with my anger depleting."

— J.W., Class 3

"It was a great life experience that changed me. I'm taking school more seriously."

— C.K., Class 12



OUR PROGRAMS



ODBI's Coaching Program for High School Students

Research shows "it's not too late" to help a teen — regardless of circumstances — positively transform his/her life. ODBI's

12-week after school program goals are: to build upon academic learning of at-risk high school students; to assist them in creating self-driven education and life plans; to empower them to achieve a high school diploma or GED and further their post-secondary education; provide them tools (laptops) to aid with their future success; and to offer program graduates college and career readiness events and college bound experiences.



Coaching For College Completion

An Orange Duffel Bag Initiative program.

ODBI's Coaching Program for College Students — CCC

Coaching for College Completion (CCC) coaches college freshmen and sophomores who have limited resources to create an education plan while connecting them to solutions for post-

secondary success. Each 12-week class is led by executive-level certified life coach, and students are connected with college advisors and ODBI advocates who help them navigate the academic and social aspects of post-secondary education. Students receive meals and materials at no cost to them. Upon successful completion, CCC students earn a \$200.00 scholarship check to help them achieve post-secondary success.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1: What are ODBI's Programs and Initiative?

ODBI's evidence-informed, results-based 12-Week After School Coaching Program to at-risk high school students in the 7 counties we currently serve and to expand the program into 2 new Georgia communities in 2016.

Each Orange Duffel Bag 12-week classes are independently evaluated using a variety of measurements to record the outcomes and success of the program and the students who have participated. IRB has previously reviewed and approved our evaluation model created by Clark Atlanta University research students under the direction of Dr. Rhonda Franklin. ODBI partners with university evaluators such as Dr. Teah Moore, Fort Valley State University and Dr. Fred Brooks at GA State University to have their students conduct the evaluations, review the data and provide back to ODBI an objective assessment and data results. All data is protected and each class participant signs an Assent, Consent, and FERPA release form as does their guardian if they are a minor.

The key outcomes to be achieved by the coaching program are to help the students improve academic performance, high school completion and college retention and GPA improvement, the development of a comprehensive life and education plan which also explores and helps the student understand the importance of stable housing and making choices that will help them succeed in the plan they create. The data collected and evaluated since 2011 has consistently shown that ODBI accomplishes the outcomes and improves critical thinking of the participants. The ODBI has formal approval from the Georgia Department of Public Health Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Dr. Brian Kirkland, IRB Coordinator/Chair, Georgia DPH - 404-463-2448

2. How does ODBI measure its outcomes & impact, i.e. what data measurements or methodology is used?

- Data methodology:**
- Active Data Collection
 - a. In-person interviews
 - b. Paper surveys
 - Existing Data
 - a. De-identified datasets
 - b. Restricted use datasets
 - c. FERPA protected data

ODBI's Program and Evaluation Model:

- ODBI evaluation model was created in partnership with Clark Atlanta University that clearly details the steps and procedures of the evaluation process that is used for the high school after school and college programs. The evaluations are conducted and analyzed independently by research students or faculty from various colleges and technical schools in GA, providing ODBI a summary report upon completion.

Impact:

- Academic progress and education achievement data is captured via MOUs ODBI has with school districts and colleges. Students provide ODBI with signed FERPA consent and authorization forms.

3. Who are ODBI's key education partners and in what areas in Georgia do you offer programs?

- Middle GA State University, Macon, GA; Atlanta Technical College, Atlanta, GA; University of West GA, Carrollton, GA; Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA; Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA; Gwinnett Technical College, Lawrenceville, GA; Fulton County Schools, Atlanta, GA; Bibb County Schools, Macon, GA; Carroll County Schools, Carrollton, GA; Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta, GA; Cobb County Schools, Marietta GA.

4. How many students have graduated from ODBI's coaching programs?

- 700+

5. What is the age range of ODBI's program participant?

- 16-24



6. How are students selected for ODBI programs?

ODBI serves students who are at risk of not achieving their education. The students are aging out of foster care, certified homeless and/or Title 1 experiencing high poverty. The high school students are selected by random sample and/or referred by DHS, the county homeless liaison, group home directors, high school councilors and social worker. College students are selected in partnership with the college who has identified them as Pell Recipients with a low GPA and at risk of not progressing towards college completion. Teachers, homeless liaison, and DHS/ILP program managers also refer college students. Students complete an application, provide their consent and assent to participate and sign a FERPA form. There is no exclusion criterion and there is no cost to the participant.

7. What are some of the key aspects and deliverables of an ODBI coaching program?

ODBI has a defined coaching curriculum and methodology for positive transformational change that helps students create self-directed life and education plans. Each week participants engage in group coaching (non directive counseling) and complete class work assignments that help them to understand the concepts of developing their own individual life and education plan. Each participant learns how to create, set and achieve SMART goals. By attending class, completing assignments, achieving their goals and creating and presenting their plan (at graduation), the student successfully graduates earning a certificate of completion. High school students earn an orange duffel bag and a laptop, bridging the digital divide for these students. College students earn an orange duffel bag and a \$200 scholarship check. Every session (high school & college) participants receive a meal provided by ODBI.

8. What is a typical schedule for an ODBI 12-week program?

ODBI 12-week high school program consists of: week one 7 hrs. on a Saturday; weeks 2-11: 3 hrs. one day each week after school; week 12: 7 hrs. on a Saturday (*graduation day*). For ODBI 12-week college program they meet for 3 hours once a week for 12 weeks along with attending one 3hr orientation. Each participant will be asked to fill out a 15-minute survey, a 15-minute mid term evaluation, and attend a 1-hour focus group to provide feedback and confirm outcomes achieved.

9. Is there a cost to the student to participate in an ODBI coaching program?

- No

10. What are some of the benefits and outcomes a student can expect to achieve by graduating an ODBI program?

Based on data and program evaluation from 30+ ODBI and CCC coaching classes and 700+ graduate interviews, surveys and reunions consistent outcomes and benefits participants achieve are:

- Self-reliance
- Self-advocacy
- Education planning and career exploration
- Improved leadership skills
- Safe and sustainable relationships
- Community involvement
- Peer-to-peer mentoring

Additionally, to further their education and help them with meaningful employment, following graduation students receive ongoing support with access to:

- Family of ODBI Adult Advocates to help them execute their life and education plans
- Academic advisors
- SAT and ACT prep and/or vocational job exam scheduling
- Professional internship/apprenticeship opportunities



COLLABORATION FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT

ODBI's Collaboration for Collective Impact Model increases the numbers of our most vulnerable students who successfully complete high school and postsecondary, and are self-reliant and productive members of society. We continue to showcase the economic impact and value of ODBI's program in the communities served. The partners and leadership teams collaborating with the ODBI to improve outcomes and education achievement rates.

KEY PARTNERS



MEDIA COVERAGE AND PRESS RELEASES

Awards: • ODBI is a proud recipient of the Community Service Award from Emory University for exemplifying leadership, the precepts of social justice and the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

- The Nobis Award for Most Innovative Programs

Featured in: *The Atlanta Magazine*

Fulton Insider

Parade Magazine

Christian Science Monitor

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

ODBI has also presented at 6 national conferences focused on improving education resources and outcomes for underserved students.





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.

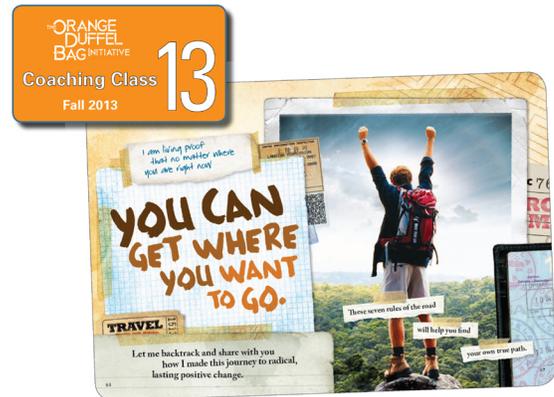
We had a little book to do journal entries. It made me sit down and map out my life. There are tear stains on the pages. Coach Sandy understood, and she just hugged me. I was surprised to hear my classmates' stories. If they can still fight, then I can still fight. The assistant principal came to our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

Orange Duffel Bag Initiative offers direction for at-risk students



7 RULES FOR THE ROAD TO CREATE YOUR ROAD MAP FOR SUCCESS

It's not often that you get the chance to be a part of something that's truly life-changing, but for some Fulton County Schools students, that's exactly what the Orange Duffel Bag Initiative (ODBI) has been for them.

ODBI is a nonprofit organization that offers 12 weeks of coaching for at-risk youth. The program is delivered by executive life coaches who help students develop a life plan that will guide them towards high school graduation, post-secondary opportunities and beyond.

According to Sara Smith Blake, Fulton County Schools' homeless liaison, the program is truly life changing.

"I learned about this program last spring and knew we needed to bring it to Fulton County," she says. "This is the type of program that can have a huge impact on students."

Earlier this month, 23 students from McClarin and Tri-Cities high schools graduated from the Orange Duffel Bag Initiative during a ceremony held on the Atlanta Technical College campus. Graduates received a new laptop as well as their own symbolic orange duffel bag.

The orange duffel bag has special significance for participants, as it did for the program's founder, Sam Bracken. A

victim of abuse as a child, Bracken's mother abandoned him when he was 15. He moved from Las Vegas to Atlanta after receiving a scholarship to play football at Georgia Tech. When he moved, all of his possessions were able to fit in an orange duffel bag. Today, as an executive with Franklin Covey, Bracken travels all over the world speaking on change, leadership and excellence.

While they appreciate getting their own duffel bag, some participants admit that they were more motivated by other things.

"I originally signed up because I wanted the new laptop," says one McClarin student. "But I've gotten so much more - I've learned a lot I can take with me that will help me with my future."

For another student, the program offered the chance to connect with other people who were going through the same things she was.

"I wanted to do it because I would have a place to go where I could open up to kids my age," says a Tri-Cities student. "You think you can only do so little because of where you're from, but I've learned that I have a lot of strengths. I always kind of knew what I was good at, but now I know why I'm good at them and how I can make a career out of those strengths."

Both students are clear about what the

program has offered them - help with making decisions, a new perspective on forgiveness and a better understanding as to who they are.

"The whole experience has been reviving," the Tri-Cities student says. "I'm actually hopeful about my future now, and I feel so much more self-aware."

She plans on graduating from high school and enlisting in the Marines. She also knows that military college is in her future, along with leadership opportunities. The McClarin student wants to attend the University of West Georgia or Georgia State University and pursue a career in psychology or social work.

These students have faced many challenges and obstacles in their lives, and they'd like to offer advice to the adults they encounter while at school.

"Some adults, some teachers, think that kids act out because their parents didn't raise them right," one of the students says. "You don't know the whole story. Please don't judge based on a mistake we might make because you don't know the whole story."

To learn more about the Orange Duffel Bag Initiative, visit <http://www.theodbi.org>.

* Names of students withheld.

How a Georgia Group Is Helping Foster Teens Take Back Their Lives

By Barry Yeoman



The smile that enlivens Gi'Nia Stone's face seems nothing short of miraculous. For much of her early childhood, Stone had little to smile about, as she and her brother contended with their mother's rage and abuse. When Stone was 6, a caseworker removed the two children from the family's Georgia trailer, and Stone spent most of her remaining youth shuttling between some 20 foster homes.

The statistics for foster kids like Stone—about 400,000 nationwide—can be grim. Studies show the youth who age out of the system face an increased risk of unemployment and incarceration. (In many states, they're typically forced out on their 18th birthdays.) According to a national survey, 25 percent of these former foster kids experience homelessness.

As a survival mechanism, foster teens often retreat into themselves. "I said, 'I refuse to be hurt by anyone else,'" recalls Stone. "'I'll live in this bubble and it's where I shall remain.'"

Then, in 2010, when Stone was 17, she heard about the Orange Duffel Bag Initiative (ODBI), a new life-coaching program for at-risk teens. Cofounded by Sam Bracken, a successful businessman who was once homeless himself (and carried his possessions in an orange duffel bag), ODBI had an ambitious curriculum. Encourage the youngsters to dream. Help them develop strategies to achieve their dreams, down to the nitty-gritty of researching college scholarships. Don't sugarcoat the obstacles they'll face. Surround them with adult advocates, including community volunteers. Create space for them to tell their stories. Then reward their work with a duffel containing a laptop.

Over seven weeks, ODBI's certified life and executive coaches guided Stone as she developed a plan to become a pediatric neurosurgeon. They also helped her and the 24 other participants confront their childhood traumas. By the program's end, Stone felt she had the skills and confidence she needed to attend Agnes Scott College.

And soon after that inaugural class graduated, civic leaders began to take notice of this innovative model for reaching some of the nation's most vulnerable kids.

'How do you keep going,' asks one young woman, 'when bad stuff just keeps coming up?'



Graduate Gi’Nia Stone now represents foster kids in the Georgia Governor’s office.

Bracken, today’s guest speaker, is fielding questions from two dozen teens in a cafeteria at Atlanta Technical College. “How do you keep going,” asks one young woman, “when bad stuff just keeps coming up?”

“Great question,” says the 290-pound former college football player, whose voice cracks with emotion as he talks. “You always have trials. What allows you to go through anything in the short term is a long-term vision that you’re excited about, something that leverages your passion, your talent, your love.”

He should know. Growing up in Las Vegas, Bracken was beaten and abused. His drug-addled mom, the “den mother” for a motorcycle gang, threw him out at 15. A handful of adults—including Bracken’s doctor, a football coach, and members of his church—took him under their wings, offering friendship and advice. Bracken attended Georgia Tech on an athletic scholarship and eventually became an executive at a consulting firm.

Hoping that his life experiences could help others, Bracken teamed with author Echo Garrett to write *My Orange Duffel Bag*, an illustrated memoir and self-help manual organized around principles such as gratitude, meaning, and choice. It was published just before Bracken and Garrett launched their coaching program three years ago. The course, now 12 weeks long, has graduated 300 Georgia teens in four cities. Garrett says virtually all have earned a high school diploma or GED or are on track to do so. (By comparison, 36 percent of teens who age out of the system don’t earn diplomas by age 19, according to a study.) Bracken and Garrett have received queries from around the country and are looking to expand into Utah, Alabama, and Florida.

Vernona Moseley, case-management director at the Hephzibah Children’s Home in Macon, Ga., recently saw three of her residents graduate. “They had more articulation about what they wanted to do,” she says. “They came back as changed people.” Two now attend college.

But college admission isn’t the end goal: ODBI mentors its graduates into adulthood. That’s good news for Stone, who was forced by finances to leave school. “I haven’t lost hope,” she says. Her team of advocates is helping her re-enroll in 2014. Meanwhile, she represents foster youth on the Governor’s Advisory Board for Children and Families. “I’m going to be a pediatric neurosurgeon,” she says. “And I say, ‘I’m going.’ Not ‘I’m trying.’”



Teenagers who finish the three-month Orange Duffel Bag course receive a laptop computer inside this symbolic duffel bag.

Sam Bracken's Orange Duffel Bag project helps at-risk former foster kids

Bracken started Orange Duffel Bag to offer life coaching and other help to teens dealing with the challenges of homelessness or foster care.



Courtesy of Sam Bracken/Orange Duffel Bag Initiative | [View Caption](#)

ATLANTA — Dimitri came to the United States from Russia when he was a youngster. Soon after that both his parents died.

For all his subsequent experiences as a ward of the state, Dimitri (not his real name) seems pretty well-adjusted. Tall and friendly, he's a senior at a suburban Atlanta high school. In not too long, he – like 250,000 other foster kids a year in the US – will be “emancipated” from state care, an 18-year-old left to fend for himself.

Dimitri and his cohort face a daunting statistic: Only 22 former foster care kids graduate from college each year in the US, out of the 2 million people who get their diploma. Equally troubling, 48 percent of aged-out foster care kids become chronically unemployed by age 26.

To avoid becoming part of that statistic, the young Russian expatriate is attending an unusual program inspired by another homeless kid: a former Georgia Tech football standout named Sam Bracken who found his way from a broken home and abusive childhood in Las Vegas – where his role models were “mobsters” and “stoners” – to a successful college football and post-college career.

What no one – even Mr. Bracken's closest advisers – knew was the extent to which his trademark orange duffel bag was stuffed not just with clothes and books, but with the memories of a chaotic childhood – a time when, Bracken writes, he “thought it was normal for a dad to punch his son square in the face.”

A notably big man still packing much of his football muscle, Bracken published his shocking personal story in 2010 in a book called “My Orange Duffel Bag: A Journey to Radical Change” with the thought of starting an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit group to convey his message of personal transformation to teenagers, especially those who “age out” of foster care every year.

Rather than an up-by-your-bootstraps tale, “My Orange Duffel Bag” is an exploration of personal pain and a paean to determination and dreams – and also to the people who help foster and safeguard those ideals in hard-bitten and often jaded foster and homeless kids.

In four years, 300 students have graduated from the Orange Duffel Bag Initiative's 12-week after-school program. Operating chiefly around Georgia, the organization has received numerous awards – including the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Service Award. Now it's in the process of gearing up a national model to address the stubborn post-foster care problem, one that Bracken calls “big, but not so big it can't be solved.”

“Homeless kids, foster kids, it's so true – they look fine, and many of them are creative and brilliant and bright and good-looking,” Bracken says in a phone interview from his home in Utah. “But underneath it all they're dealing with trauma and instability to a point where it's very difficult for them to handle things. And when they leave high school [and age out of foster care] we lose track of them; they become invisible, they live in the shadows.”

The main precepts behind the Orange Duffel Bag Initiative (ODBI) are life coaching and advocacy primarily for teens dealing with homelessness or foster care. So far, 80 percent of Orange Duffel Bag students have graduated or are about to – itself a measure of success, given that the overall high school graduation rate for foster kids in the US is just below 50 percent. The point is to provide a bridge for teens who are “aging out” of foster care, to help them get through a period that could – and likely will – define the rest of their lives.

ODBI is evaluating its ability to address “issues like stability, well-being, employment, and self-reliance,” says Mike Daly, president of ODBI. “Those measurements are ... powerful for helping a teen struggling to become a successful adult.” Drawn to the project by the promise of a laptop computer and their own orange duffel bag, the teens – outwardly normal, gregarious, and awkward – are in the middle of a 12-week “journey” designed to give them a road map, to help them formulate not just Plan A “but Plans B and C as well,” says ODBI vice president Diana Black.

They also get what so many wayward kids lack: someone who believes in them.

The Great Recession unmoored a record number of American teenagers. Since 2008, child homelessness has increased by 38 percent in the US, testing and stretching state and county welfare and foster care budgets. Here in Georgia, the state welfare agency is a system filled with good intentions but all too often with poor execution – and dismal results.

A major study of foster kids, the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, known as the Midwest Study, tracked youths older than 12 years until age 26. It puts the plight of aged-out foster and homeless kids in a stark light: 12 percent of the young men in the study landed in prison; 60 percent had stayed on the couch of a friend in the span between study interviews; and 35 percent reported four or more couch-surfing spans. Thirty percent said they had completed at least one year of college, but never finished. Fifteen percent didn’t know if their dad was alive or not.

Gi’Nia Stone is determined to succeed. A veteran of dozens of foster homes and a failed adoption, she is one of the standouts of the ODBI program. Smart and talented – she plays nine musical instruments – she wants to become a neurosurgeon. But she still couch surfs and struggles to stay in college.

She watched her foster parents cash her state reimbursement checks and then claim poverty when she needed a new instrument. The difference between Ms. Stone and many of her friends from intact families can come down to needing \$50 for a book. “They can get that money” from a parent, she says. “I can’t.”

Sociologists say seemingly mundane details often trip up even motivated foster care kids. ODBI programs that provide mentors and teach planning skills fill a big void.

“One of the specific things I see is that the planning process [for teens leaving state care] doesn’t begin soon enough,” says Amy Dworsky, a sociologist and foster care researcher at the University of Chicago. “And often there’s a tendency to wait until right before the young person [is about to age out] where the discharge planning really needs to begin long before the age of emancipation.”

Written in a heart-rending, bare-bones style, “My Orange Duffel Bag” traces Bracken’s early abandonment by his mom and abuse by stepfathers. His teenage determination to become a football player and lawyer would have meant nothing if concerned adults hadn’t stepped in to help guide him, Bracken writes.

His story begins in Las Vegas and ends in Salt Lake City, a journey from a messed-up home – his mother was once the den mother for a violent motorcycle gang – and the lessons from his orange duffel bag that eventually led to one of his mottos: “Travel light, travel right.”

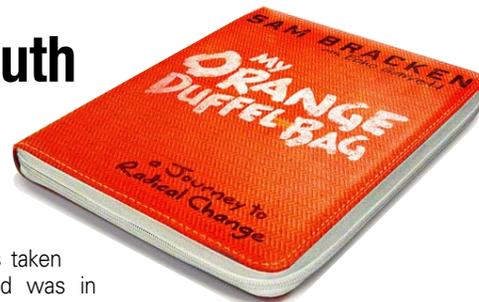
In a section titled “Age 16,” Bracken writes, “Mom has a mental breakdown. I visit her in the desert where she’s staked her claim to a long ago abandoned gold mine. Sometimes she stays in a dirt-floor shack, warming herself by a pot-bellied stove. She feeds me dumpster stew and tells me who my real father is. I start looking for God.”

Bracken’s story shocked his friends when it appeared. He didn’t want to dredge it up, but his co-writer, Echo Garrett, told him that nobody would care about the book unless he leveled with readers about what his life had been like.

To Bracken, the main goal for ODBI is to give promising and at times difficult young people like Dimitri, the Russian-born orphan, mentors who can offer help, advice, and affirmation.

“There were so many powerful people along the way who held my hand, dealt with my issues, and tolerated my imperfections to help me get to a better place,” Bracken says. “Those people saw in me what I didn’t see in myself, and that’s what [ODBI] does: We see in these kids what they don’t see in themselves. It’s remarkable what they can become.”

Executive, author Sam Bracken inspires youth to press on despite troubled upbringing



Sam Bracken was 18 years old when he left an abusive childhood in Las Vegas, boarded an airplane for only the second time and headed east.

His mother had thrown him out of the house three years before, and he managed to get through high school while living with a friend's family. When he landed in Atlanta, he possessed only two things: a football scholarship to Georgia Tech and an orange duffel bag stuffed with everything he owned.



Sam Bracken sits with foster kids in his academy. Left to right, Sebastian Mensah, Bracken, Mashon Meadows, and Joseph Cook. Businessman Sam Bracken, 45, was an abused and homeless teen living in Las Vegas when he got a full football scholarship to Georgia Tech.

"He had one pair of jeans and one T-shirt," recalled John Porter, an Atlanta business exec who attended Tech with Bracken in the early 1980s. "And it must have been very strange, moving from Nevada to Georgia."

On Monday, Bracken was back in Atlanta with a message for other unfortunate youth. After almost two years of planning, the first 25 teens graduated from the pilot leadership program he designed for the state's Division of Family and Children Services office. The

concept, based on lessons he learned through his rough upbringing, his time at Tech and his successful segue to a meaningful life, offered teens in the state's foster care system the chance to develop their own visions for the future and specific goals to achieve their dreams.

Bracken, now a successful executive and father of four in Salt Lake City, returned to his fond roots in Georgia to launch the program that's based on his recently-released book, *"My Orange Duffel Bag: A Journey to Radical Change."* Co-written with local author Echo Garrett, the work is a blend of uncensored biography, photos, audio CD and handbook for making the best of life, no matter how difficult the circumstances.

"My vision wasn't just to write a book," Bracken said. "I wanted to help other kids unlock passionate change in their lives. As a kid, I was helped by so many people. There is no way I can ever repay those who helped me in those moments of absolute despair, but when I needed something, they stepped in and helped me. This book is a part of my thanks."



While enjoying the celebration held at the Wardlaw Center overlooking Georgia Tech's football stadium where he played for Coach Bill Curry, Bracken holds 10-month-old Angelo, son of Mashon Meadows. She is one of the 25 teens in foster care who successfully completed the pilot program to provide leadership and life-skills training to older foster youth.

The list of Bracken's life-altering moments are still fresh in his 47-year-old mind: the friend whose family took him in and taught him what "normal" was; Georgia Tech football coach Bill Curry who gave him a scholarship; a friend's parent who gave him a summer job when he was broke; the couple who took him home after church one morning and fed him. Through those acts of grace, he never lost his faith in the future. It's a story that resonates with Mashon Meadows, an 18-year-old who lives in an independent group home in College Park and was selected for the pilot program.

"I was four when I was taken away from my mom and was in and out of the foster system," Meadows said. "I went from home to home. I was raped; I ran away from home. I was house-hopping."

Meadows has now spent almost a year in College Park and is working on a GED while planning to own her own restaurant. Being part of the leadership program has helped define her path.

"I had never broken it down to different pieces before, but Mr. Sam taught me how to do it," she said. "I put down my mission, my values and what goals I'm working on."

Kathy Herren, the deputy director of programs and policy for Family and Children Services, said those personal connections were the best part of the 8-week program.

"Sam is someone our youth can identify with," she said. "His personal story is very compelling, but he is not the sum of his past. He showed them that by having a clear vision and setting goals, he is where he is today. I'd like to see this program have a statewide influence."

Bracken also dreams of taking his Orange Duffel Bag program to the rest of the country.

"The 2002 census estimated almost 2 million homeless children, and I believe that estimate has skyrocketed with the recession," he said. "Most kids in foster care age out at 18, and more than half of them don't have high school degrees. They're not self-reliant. In a few months, they're homeless and forgotten. But with this program, we create a structure to help them discover their talents, to have a meaningful long view and a vision that encourages them to make the best of every day, every week, every year."

Along with the leadership program, Bracken formed the Orange Duffel Bag Foundation to spread his message. Atlanta businessman Mike Daly joined the effort last fall and recently took over as board chair.

"I was very touched by his story," Daly said. "And I related to the book, even though I wasn't a homeless kid. It reminds you of the real steps necessary to change your perspective and gives you skill sets to create change. The orange duffel bag is now a metaphor (for hope) for anyone struggling on the street."

The book and the program have shown 18-year-old foster teen Joseph Cook that he can succeed in life despite his background, and he can inspire others to change as well.

"I can tell other teens, 'Just because you're going through this doesn't mean you can't succeed,'" he said. "I want to prove to myself and others that I can do it."



Bracken with the inaugural class of Certified Orange Duffel Bag Coaches. At right is Joseph Cook. The newly minted coaches are listening to Val Peterson, Georgia Tech's "First Lady" (wife of Dr. G.P. "Bud" Peterson, university president), speak from her perspective as a foster parent. When Bracken arrived in Georgia, everything he owned fit into an orange duffel bag.

By H.M. Cauley

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