



# Small token of comfort

My Story My Bag, launched by Cara Finger of Brentwood, connects foster children with duffel bags to help restore their sense of self-worth and control. SUBMITTED

## Brentwood nonprofit makes big impact on children in foster care

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Brentwood resident Cara Finger, who launched the nonprofit My Bag My Story last week, said a duffel bag seems like a small item, but to some children in the foster care system, it symbolizes the things most valuable — self-worth, dignity and comfort during a difficult time.

Her new nonprofit provides duffel bags for children who are in foster care, giving them something of their own to keep up with their belongings.

Finger, who has served as a foster parent herself and has three children, two of whom were adopted, said so many innocent children are forced to cope with traumatic situations, and she wants to make it a little

easier.

"It wasn't until we became foster parents that I saw a child carrying a plastic sack," Finger said. "I started thinking what if I could provide them bags and got the idea to start a nonprofit.

"You are taking away a child's self-respect when you give them a trash bag. Sometimes the only thing kids have control over is their stuff."

Finger has seen firsthand the comfort such a small token can provide.

"I heard about a child at DCS just last week who had been in six or seven foster homes. She was upset because she felt disorganized," she said.

"But once she was able to organize her fall clothes and summer clothes in two different bags, she said, 'I feel so much better.' That's the only thing she had control over."

### 'I might have been like others waiting to be adopted'

Finger said she was lucky.

At 2 months old, she was adopted by loving parents and has lived a happy, secure life. However, she remains keenly aware that many other children are waiting — for an uncertain amount of time — to reunite with their families or to be adopted, while in the foster care system.

"I know if I had not been adopted when I was two months old and had two loving parents, I might have been like (the hundreds of thousands of children) today waiting to be adopted," Finger said.

According to the U.S. Department of Health & Hu-

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# Bags

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man Services Children's Bureau, 125,000 children were waiting to be adopted, while 437,000 were in foster care in 2018.

During a foster home placement, she explained, children are faced with having to adapt to a new environment, new school, new area of town and new people. The transition can be difficult.

"Kids just want to be loved and have a place to call home," Finger said.

## Shortage of foster families in Williamson County

Many children end up in state custody through

the Tennessee Department of Children Services because of circumstances beyond their control such as child abuse, neglect, a death or incarcerated parents.

And the need for foster homes is great.

"Some are surprised to hear that Williamson County has children in foster care," Finger said.

Right now, approximately 100 children in Williamson County are under foster care, according to DCS, while 635 reside in Davidson County and 9,286 are spread across the state.

Ann Brooks, DCS supervisor of resource linkage, said there is a shortage of foster families in Williamson County, statewide and nationally.

In comparison, there are currently just 173 fos-



Cara and Christian Finger stand with their children Corinne, 17, Caroline, 18, and Christian, 14. Cara Finger launched the nonprofit My Bag My Story last week to help foster children. SUBMITTED

ter homes in Davidson County and 47 in Williamson County, through DCS only, Brooks said.

Finger said more foster families in Williamson County would better help local children to adjust.

Children placed outside of the county have to start over at new schools in a completely new environment.

A foster child in her family's care had attended three different schools in one school year, Finger said, which is not uncommon.

"It's hard to make new friends each time and figure out who to sit with at the lunch table," she said.

Finger said her journey as a foster parent has helped her to grow and given her the opportunity to give back.

"It's the best, most difficult and most rewarding, sad and wonderful thing you will ever do," she said.

## My Bag My Story

## provides support

There are various foster care service organizations that help connect foster families with a foster child.

Laura Troup, social services worker at Agape of Nashville, an agency that facilitates adoption and foster services, said My Bag My Story duffel bags are already providing a sense of ownership and comfort for children who walk through its doors.

Troup and her husband have served as foster parents to eight children over the past five years, and Troup, who is accustomed to the process, grew up with a foster sister.

"It was my foster sister who planted the seed for me and my husband to become foster parents," Troup said.

"It has been such a gift. Foster care has given us a sense of community and emotional and spiritual growth."

She is also glad nonprofits like My Bag My Story are out there to support organizations like Agape.

"Everyone deserves their self-worth to be restored," Troup said. "It removes that connection that trash bag, to the thought or feeling that they are worthless or like trash or that they don't have equality."

In addition to DCS and Agape of Nashville, other



Cara Finger, center, stands with supporters Trish Elam, left, of Pandy Cotton Candy and Presley Russell of Draper James at the launch last week of her new nonprofit My Bag My Story at Draper James in Nashville. SUBMITTED

organizations that facilitate placing foster children in a temporary home include Tennessee Baptist Children's Home, Tennessee Alliance for Kids, Youth Villages and Bethany Christian Services.

The nonprofit Love on Wheels also provides backpacks and luggage for children in state custody.

## Support My Bag My Story

With more than 200 bags sold and partnerships with six agencies, My Bag My Story is propelling forward since its launch last week at clothing store Draper James in Nashville. The purchase of each duffel bag funds another, which is then distributed to a child in foster care.

"My passion is that no child should have to suffer mistakes of a parent. A child is innocent in all ways," Finger said.

"If providing something as simple as a duffel bag can make a small difference, that's what I want to do."

For more information or to order a bag, visit

mybagmystory.com.

## Become a Tennessee foster parent

When children are not able to stay safely in their own homes, they may enter the state's custody.

The first goal for the Department of Children's Services is to work toward safely returning the kids to their families. While issues and concerns in the immediate family are addressed, foster parents provide homes and a place to nurture and support the children.

To become a foster parent in Tennessee you must:

- Be at least 21
- Be fingerprinted and pass a background check
- Complete a training program called PATH — Parents As Tender Healers
- Provide five references
- Participate in a home study
- Provide documentation of a sufficient income.

To learn more about becoming a foster parent, visit [www.tn.gov/tinfos-ters/foster-parent](http://www.tn.gov/tinfos-ters/foster-parent).