

THE MIRROR *Family News*

Donation Drive Kicks Off For Young Adults Leaving Foster Care System

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The foster care system can be a stressful place for children who often move from place to place over a long period of time.

For those between ages 18 and 21, it also means leaving or becoming emancipated from the child welfare system and moving into the real world, outside of that realm. Often, the individuals are left to their own devices when it comes to facing life's challenges while being tasked with the responsibility of attaining a higher education or training, and finding employment, housing, food and other amenities.

Because most have lived in a group, foster or relative caregiver's home, many will not have the necessities for day-to-day living, said Sarah Otis, a Maumee resident and the former executive director of the Panther Pride Foundation.

She and her husband, Jim, have founded Love and Luggage, an organization dedicated to helping those

young adults who are leaving the foster care system by providing them with basic items to help get started. The couple recently launched a donation drive through an Amazon online campaign.

"All of the things you would send your child off to college with are the same things these independent-living youths need and deserve as they launch into adulthood," Sarah said. "For the most part, they are on their own."

The idea for Love and Luggage originated more than a decade ago and was prompted by the couple's experience when they adopted their daughter, Amanda, in 1999. According to Sarah, their daughter had been in the foster care system through Lucas County Children Services (LCCS) for five years when she arrived at their house carrying two garbage bags filled with her personal belongings. At the time, Amanda was 10 years old.

"How do we measure the life of a child who has had a



A Love and Luggage donation drive is currently underway to support young adults ages 18 to 21 who are becoming emancipated or leaving the child welfare system to live on their own. The online Amazon donation drive will support 30 individuals leaving the local system. The young adults will receive the items in June at First Presbyterian Church.

life of personal trauma in two garbage bags? What defined her was hurtful and was demeaning. We knew we could do better," said

Sarah. "She thought nothing of being packed up in two garbage bags. This was her life."

Love and Luggage was

founded under the umbrella of the Adopt America Network.

There are 424,000 children in the foster care system in the United States. In 2018, LCCS had an average daily caseload of 1,471 children in the system. Almost all, 98 percent, were living in a family environment, including 605 or 41 percent who were living in their own homes; 431 or 30 percent who were living in foster care and 401 or 27 percent who were living with a relative or other kinship caregiver.

Love and Luggage is working to address the needs of 30 young adults getting ready to leave the system. The goal is to give each a duffel bag filled with hygiene items, a towel set, a Visa card and a Bible. In addition, there will be a resource guide and contact information for support organizations. The bags will be presented during a ceremony at First Presbyterian Church in mid June.

"This is a community investment because the

more successful emancipating teens are at transitioning into adulthood, the more likely they will become productive, taxpaying citizens themselves," Sarah said.

Teen homelessness is a particular problem among emancipating teens, both locally and nationwide. This then leads to other problems, such as crime, drug use and more, she added.

"We can do better as a society to support these kids who are on their own, not because they did something but because of their family situations," Sarah said. "We want them to be successful and we want to create ways and leverage ways to do that."

To donate to Love and Luggage through the online Amazon campaign, please visit amzn.to/3um1zf4.

Used items cannot be accepted.

For questions about Love and Luggage, please contact Sarah and Jim Otis at (419) 283-4298 or e-mail ssotis@bex.net.