



DCFS AT WORK

Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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Social Worker Erica Chait

When Erica Chait learned that children in foster care carried their in garbage bags when they went from one home to another, the idea did not sit well with her.

In fact, while pursuing a graduate degree in social work at California State University, Northridge, Erica seized the opportunity to initiate change with a project she called Bags of Hope.

“It bothered me so much to see kids transporting their belongings in trash bags,” said Erica, now a social worker with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Resource Family Support Liaison Unit.

“This seemed like such an obvious issue when I was developing the project and I was looking to do something that could have a lasting impact on our youth,” she added.

To that end, Erica sought help from the [H. Savinar Luggage Co.](#), a local retailer with storefronts in Canoga Park and West Los Angeles. Working closely with store owner Mark Stern, they set out to obtain gently used suitcases from existing customers for children and youth in foster care to store and transport their personal belongings when in between placements.

Later, Erica coordinated a social media campaign that encouraged community members to donate bags.

“We had a big rollout to coincide with National Foster Care Month in May 2014,” Erica recalls. “Since then, we have continued to do mini-drives periodically for donations. The response from the community has been incredible, and it’s great to see people eager to help.”

While impersonal and unsightly, garbage bags do offer a practical and cost-effective way to easily carry clothing, shoes and other belongings. Erica points out, however, that something as simple as a suitcase can enhance a child’s sense of self-worth, given that children and youth living in foster care often deal with issues of low self-esteem as a result of traumatic experiences.

Erica sees Bags of Hope as one small but tangible way in which to help boost the mental and emotional well-being and overall development of children and youth living in foster care.



Erica Chait and Mark Stern inside H. Savinar Luggage Co.

"A former boss of mine used to say, 'When you look good, you feel good,' and that always stuck with me," Erica said. "I think a real suitcase goes a long way toward making these children and youth feel better at a time when it can really make a difference."

What began as a school project has now become part of Erica's legacy at DCFS and she continues to garner support. In recent times, for instance, a generous colleague donated custom luggage tags to pair with the suitcases.



Staff from regional offices and other departments regularly approach Erica to obtain suitcases for the youth they serve, a request that she is happy to fulfill.

While the effort remains relatively narrow in its reach, Erica aspires to one day have it implemented more widely. Also on her wish list is ample storage space where she can store the inventory of gently used bags.

Focused and undeterred, Erica continues to seek opportunities that expand the project. Recently, for example, she facilitated the donation of 40 new bags from H. Savinar Luggage Co. to the nonprofit Hope in a Suitcase, which supports youth living in foster care.

"I got a note recently from one resource family, and the kids were so excited for the suitcases that they painted and decorated them to really make them their own," Erica said. "Responses like that really warm my

heart and are the reason why I keep this project going."

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