

Getting ready to age out

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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It's one of the most discouraging realities in our society: foster kids who "age out" or leave the foster system and have to fend for themselves. Each year 250,000 of these kids leave foster care; each year only 22 foster care kids graduate from college.

Assisting these kids is a task only for the toughest and most tenacious—who are also creative and compassionate. Perhaps those qualities come with having been through a chaotic childhood oneself. Sam Bracken is that guy—he was a kid from a broken home who became a Georgia Tech football player and a lawyer. He credits adults "along the way" who cared about him and guided him toward his goals.

Now Bracken has tried to do the same thing. Three hundred high school students have already completed a 12-week after-school program called the [Orange Duffel Bag Initiative](#). So far, [says Patrik Jonnson in the the \*Christian Science Monitor\*](#), 80 percent of the ODBI kids have graduated from high school—compared with the overall graduate rate of under 50 percent for teens in foster care. There is hope that this regional model (Georgia) can be expanded for use nationwide.

So what's in the duffel bag? It's a metaphor for the skills and support needed to make a teen self-reliant. Bracken's own duffel bag became the symbol of his tempestuous childhood and teen years, as well as the title of his 2010 book, [My Orange Duffel Bag](#).

Read more about [Bracken and the U.S. challenge of homelessness and teens](#), or read other stories of positive initiatives in [Making a Difference](#), a marvelous ongoing series in the *Monitor*.