

Los Angeles' Foster Youth Find Hope... In The Form Of A Suitcase

Rebecca George, Danelle Geller, Marsha Austen, and Eufe de la Torre
Co-Founders, Hope In A Suitcase, Los Angeles, CA
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“Despite the hardships they face, kids somehow find ways to keep laughing, playing and imagining. I believe Hope In A Suitcase is the initial reminder to let them know they matter and are not alone.” – Eufe de la Torre

Imagine the trauma of being separated from your family—sometimes in the middle of the night—with nothing more than the clothes on your back and a trash bag of belongings. Sadly, that is an all too familiar story for many children in Los Angeles’s foster care system. Today more than 30,000 children are in foster care in Los Angeles, and of that a staggering 65% change schools approximately seven or more times before graduating high school. That means constant shifting, moving and relocation. Thankfully, Hope in a Suitcase makes foster youth’s lives a little easier and more dignified. The LA-based, volunteer-driven nonprofit provides foster children and teens with a suitcase or duffle bag, filled with basic essentials and comfort items. In this story, the Co-Founders—Rebecca George, Eufe de la Torre, Marsha Austen—share their motivations for creating the movement, how their years of hard work have made Hope in a Suitcase a success, and what the future holds.



The Story Behind Hope In A Suitcase: How It Started

In 2016, the idea for Hope in a Suitcase was born out of a chance introduction between LA moms, Rebecca George and Marsha Austen, outside their children’s elementary school. George’s mother had been a social worker with the Chicago Department of Children and Family Services (CDCFS) and she grew up hearing about the difficulties foster children face.

“One image that has always stuck with me is that many children entering foster care, especially in emergency situations, have to pack their belongings in a trash bag,” said George.

Saddened by the plight of these abandoned children, Austen and George enlisted the help of friends Nicole Brzeski, Dr. Lauren Crosby, Eufe de la Torre, Danelle Geller and Stacy Kravetz to join in their effort, and they set a goal to pack 200 suitcases and distribute them across Los Angeles. Each one would be filled with brand new clothing, pajamas, underwear, toiletries, books, stuffed animals and personal notes of encouragement. The first challenge to

arise: How to get them to the children who needed them? Matt Casden, president of West Coast Archives (and husband of the friend that introduced them), immediately stepped up: “If you’re telling me there’s a little boy or girl out there without a secure family situation in Los Angeles and only a couple of things in a trash bag, I’ll walk the suitcases to them myself.” Casden went the extra mile, donating storage space for packed suitcases, an online indexing system so that suitcase requests could easily be matched to inventory, and drivers and trucks to pick up and distribute every single duffel bag. To the team’s surprise, they more than doubled their original goal quickly, collecting 500 suitcases. In 2016 alone, the lean Hope in a Suitcase crew served well over 2,000 children across LA. Today, two years later, Hope in a Suitcase has served more than 5,000 foster children.

Hope In A Suitcase Efforts Today

The beauty of Hope in a Suitcase is that it isn’t a “One Size Fits All” operation. Children in foster care range in age from newborn to 18 years old, and each stage requires different needs. In addition, the agencies that place children with foster families have storage limitations of their own. That’s why Hope in a Suitcase doesn’t simply drop off 100 generically packed duffel bags at a foster care agency’s doorstep all at once. Instead, they work closely with organizations to tailor what they provide to fit the needs of the agency and the children they serve. In some cases, that means Hope in a Suitcase will provide them with a pre-packed age and gender specific duffel bag for a foster youth, filled with essentials that will get them through the first couple days: new clothing for the first day of school; pajamas, a cuddly blanket, and an age-appropriate book for the first nights in a new environment; toiletries and undergarments they may be too embarrassed to request and a personal note of encouragement from another child. In other cases, Hope in a Suitcase stocks the closets of transitional shelters so staff can reach for items to comfort children immediately upon arrival and so they are prepared and feel a sense of dignity when meeting their new foster families.



In August 2017, Hope in a Suitcase partnered with [The Book Foundation](#), [The Book Truck](#), [iFoster](#) and [Foster Care Counts](#) to open a Mid-City LA storefront called, [The Emporium](#): Foster Resource & Literacy Center. There, tweens, teens and transition age youth (TAY) can shop entirely free of charge for casual and business clothing, basic essentials and literacy material.



“Once kids hit the age of 11 or 12, there’s a big variation in size and personal style. Not only do they need to try clothing on, but only *they* know what they like and need,” says Austen. “The Emporium allows young people, who often feel like they’re at the mercy of other people’s decisions, the opportunity to choose whatever makes them feel great—whether it be clothing, luggage, art supplies or books.”

The Emporium also offers a valuable literacy element to children and teens in foster care. They get to choose from a wide selection of books, provided by the Book Foundation & Book Truck.

The Emporium receives referrals of current and former foster youth in need of resources from Foster Family Agencies, the Department of Children and Family Services, CASA of Los Angeles and LA Guardian Scholars Programs. Where Hope in a Suitcase ends its services for youth at age 18, the Book Foundation and Foster Care Counts pick up, by providing TAY (age 17/18 – approximately age 24) with items and services they need as they

emancipate from the foster care system. Explains Ruth Stalford, Director of The Book Foundation and The Emporium's TAY Boutique, "The coordinated effort at The Emporium is envisioned to help insure that no youth 'fall through the cracks' as they transition from young teens to young adults."

What the Future Holds

Hope in a Suitcase has made great strides to eradicate the Trash Bag as Luggage dilemma. But, with more than 30,000 children in the system, there's still a lot more work to do. The 100% volunteer-driven non-profit collaborates with hundreds of individuals and dozens of organizations, schools, companies and community groups. They are grateful for early support and funding from organizations such as The Water Buffalo Club, The Pritzker Foster Care Initiative and Shelter Partnership, they are always on the lookout for new volunteers and fundraiser ideas, and they encourage young people to host supply drives, pack duffle bags, write encouraging notes for foster youth and organize bake sales and lemonade stands.

Future plans at The Emporium: Foster Resource & Literacy Center include:

- Hosting job training and workshops for foster youth;
- Hosting pop up events and programs to connect guests to available online services and discounts, including iFoster's free laptop & cell phone program;
- Hosting more personalized shopping experiences for tweens/teens once or twice monthly;
- Serving as a resource hub for older teens who are nearing emancipation, so they know where they can turn to for essentials and interview clothes, and eventually, for internships and employment opportunities.

Says Hope in a Suitcase Co-Founder Eufe de la Torre: "During my more than 20 years of advocating for LA county foster children, the thing that continually strikes me is how resilient these children are." Austen explains the team's confirmation to keep going when things sometimes got tough: "Every time we're hit with a challenge, be it small or large, someone appears out of nowhere offering exactly what we need. Whether it's a monetary donation, high priority item, expertise, or an extra pair of hands, it's happened for Hope in a Suitcase in so many places and so many times that we truly believe Los Angeles is a City of Angels."