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4 friends have 1 cause — helping foster kids moving out on their own

Organization helps 18-year-olds aging out of foster-care system

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It began when four friends read about a girl in foster care turning 18.

Aging out, as it's known to the state bureaucrats.

Freaking out, is how the friends figured they'd react if they were in her shoes.

"When you're 18, you're still just a kid," said Ilana Wolpert, of Weston. "I couldn't imagine waking up one day and being told you have to live on your own. It touched us."

Said Alex Rubin: "We wanted to do something to help."

That's how Project 1841 was born.

"It stands for 18-year-olds, four girls, one cause," said Rubin, of Weston.

The four girls are longtime friends who attend different high schools. Since last spring, they've worked together to help foster kids who reach their independence day.

"We'd get together to see each other anyway, so we figured, 'Why not do something good for the community, too?'" said Alexandra Kaplan, of Coral Springs, a sophomore at North Broward Prep.

On Friday, Wolpert, Rubin, Kaplan and Alli Weiss made their monthly drop at ChildNet, the agency that oversees the foster system in Broward.

Every month, ChildNet gives them a list of young adults who'll be turning 18 and leaving the system to live on their own.

The girls create a personalized care package for each: a birthday card along with a piece of donated luggage filled with toiletries and other necessities that ease the transition.

"We were told that kids used to leave with all their belongings in shopping bags," said Weiss, a sophomore at Cypress Bay High in Weston. "This lets them start out with some dignity."

The girls say they have raised more than \$3,000 through bake sales at Publix and Walgreens, along with selling T-shirts with the group's logo.



They have received some \$1,800 in donated luggage from Travelpro International, a manufacturer in [Boca Raton](#). They solicit toiletries and gift cards from local merchants.

The foster teens who "age out" of the system get a monthly stipend from the state if they're in school, but the young adults often have little community support.

"If I go to college and something goes wrong, I always have my parents to fall back on," said Rubin, a sophomore at the University School of Nova Southeastern. "Some of these kids don't have anybody."

At first, Wolpert said, ChildNet officials regarded them warily.

"But then we showed up every month with the luggage, so they knew we were serious," said Wolpert, a sophomore at Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale.

"They actually delivered," said Michael Stephens, a ChildNet independent living supervisor. "When you look at them, you think they could be out playing with their MP3s or going to the mall, but they're giving back and considering those less fortunate than them. They're a very special group of kids."

I met them last month, after Rubin sent an e-mail saying my Christmas 2007 column on Robin Miller, who turned 18 that day, served as their inspiration. "We would just like to thank you for opening our eyes," Rubin wrote.

In turn, I thanked them for caring and obliterating the stereotype that well-off teens were self-absorbed and materialistic.

Rubin said they hope to grow Project 1841 so it continues after they graduate. They cite "Becca's Closet," a charity that collects prom dresses for the underprivileged in memory of a Broward teen, as a model.

ChildNet's Stephens said that when foster teens turn 18 and are given the luggage package, "They're totally surprised and stunned."

"I guess they're happy to know someone cares," said Kaplan.

To learn more or make a donation of luggage, toiletries or cash, contact the group at project1841@yahoo.com.

Michael Mayo's column runs Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at mmayo@SunSentinel.com or 954-356-4508.

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