



Project 1841 Helps Foster Teens in Broward

Teen girls collect, pack and distribute duffels with toiletries for teens aging out of foster care

For most teens, turning 18 is a significant milestone, marking the beginning of their journey into adulthood. Their future looks bright, filled with birthday celebrations, prom, graduation and college. But that is not the case for hundreds of South Florida foster teens that age out of the system on their 18th birthday.

These teens face a harsh reality – they are no longer part of the foster care system and must spend their birthday packing up and moving out of their foster home and into an apartment with what little belongings they have often packed into garbage bags.

Alex Rubin first read about the aging out of foster teens back in 2007, in a Sun-Sentinel article by Mike Mayo. The photo that accompanied the article struck a chord in Alex and she knew she had to do something to help. She called on three of her closest friends, Alexandra Kaplan, Alli Weiss and Ilana Wolpert, and together they formed Project 1841. The numbers are symbolic: 18 year olds (the foster teens they help) - 4 girls (the founders) – 1 cause - to give dignity to foster teens leaving the system by supplying them with a duffel bag or suitcase and basic toiletries before they age out.

The Broward County agency ChildNet manages the system of foster care and related services for abused, abandoned and neglected children. Each month, ChildNet gives Project 1841 a list of the first names of the teens that are about to age out of the system into independent living. The rest is up to the girls of Project 1841.

They have raised funds by hosting bake sales and selling t-shirts and have even applied and received a grant in the amount of \$3,000 from the Miami Dolphins. Project 1841 also accepts monetary donations, gift cards and toiletries. Each month, the girls purchase the duffel bags, fill it with a bag full of toiletries and include a personalized birthday card for each teen, wishing them good luck and a bright future. They deliver the packed bags, called "starter kits" to ChildNet, and then staff members at the agency distribute them.

Over the past three and a half years, the girls have provided starter kits to every single boy and girl aging out of the foster care system in Broward County, totaling over 350 teens. It has been a richly rewarding experience for all of them. "Being a part of Project 1841 has made me realize a lot about myself, and a lot about people in general," says Alex. "It has opened my eyes to how much we as a community can help those



▲ **FOUNDING FOUR** Friends and founders of Project 1841 - Ilana Wolpert, Alex Rubin, Alli Weiss, Alexandra Kaplan.

who need it, if we put some effort towards it."

For Alexandra, Project 1841 has enlightened her about significant issues in the community. "By helping others, especially those my own age, it brings a sense of fulfillment to my own life and as a result, I have learned to appreciate the little things in life which many of us take for granted on a daily basis, from a bar of soap to a pillow to sleep on."

Ilana feels that she has become more empathetic since participating in Project 1841. "I have learned that, despite our different situations, we and the foster teens are all just teenagers learning how to be independent."

Alli credits Project 1841 for making her the compassionate person she is today. "Through the inspirational stories of the foster care teens receiving

our luggage, I've become so empathetic and so driven to help. 1841 has shown me that dedication and passion to a cause can truly make a difference."

All four girls are high school seniors and will graduate this year and embark on the next stage of their lives - college. Creating Project 1841 from scratch was like "having a baby, without the baby," jokes Alex. They have watched it grow and could not imagine the project coming to an end. Luckily for them, their legacy will continue as a new group of teens takes over. Alexandra's sister, Caroline Kaplan, a freshman at Coral Glades High School, and her friends, Chelsea Contessa, Carly Purcell and Samantha Robinson are thrilled to be on board as the next generation of Project 1841.

Caroline says she has watched her sister grow and learn so much from Project 1841 and she is more than ready to take on the role of President and Treasurer. "I've always been on the sidelines, watching people stand up for a cause they believe in," says Caroline. "Doing this project now will prove to me that I can be that person, too."

Carly will serve as secretary and is eager to volunteer with the project because she likes to help people. "Being part of this group is larger than life because I thought I was a single, insignificant person, but now I'm helping make a difference in the community and changing lives."

The group will rely on Chelsea to handle all aspects of publicity. By contacting local media, Chelsea hopes to get more exposure for Project 1841, creating more awareness for their cause. "Being a part of this group makes me feel more involved in my community," says Chelsea. "It's an amazing feeling to know that you're making a difference in the world-- which is exactly



▲ **SECOND GENERATION** Caroline Kaplan, Samantha Robinson, Carly Purcell and Chelsea Contessa with packed duffels ready for delivery.

what this group is doing. It's an honor to just be involved."

Samantha agrees with Chelsea. "I'm honored to have been chosen by Caroline to help continue Project 1841's legacy that her sister, Alexandra, helped to start." By being part of Project 1841, she thinks it will make her appreciate how lucky she is, and to not take things for granted. She will oversee fundraising efforts and plans to apply for more grants and will focus on reaching out to corporations for monetary donations and large quantities of product samples.

The new girls have already transitioned into their roles and have packed and delivered the bags for the April and May birthdays. Through the generous support of the community, the girls have been able to expand the starter kits to include a pillow, pillowcase and bag of snacks. They hope to be able to include additional basic necessity items, such as kitchen towels, dishes and utensils, too.

For the senior girls, the legacy of Project 1841 is one of their proudest accomplishments and they encourage other teens to do something positive in the community. "My advice to teens interested in changing the world is to get involved with an existing charity or do your research and start something up!" exclaims Alli.

Alexandra offers the following advice: "Recognize a problem in your community, set a goal for yourself, and not only reach it, but surpass it! While your life may be consumed by schoolwork and seem ridiculously hectic, you are never too busy to help others."

The girls all agree that Project 1841 would not have been a success without the support of ChildNet. "Every person working at ChildNet has helped to make 1841 as well-known and as successful as it is today, and I am eternally grateful for that," say Alex. "Your kindness and help really made Project 1841 go far," adds Ilana, "and we could not have done it without you."

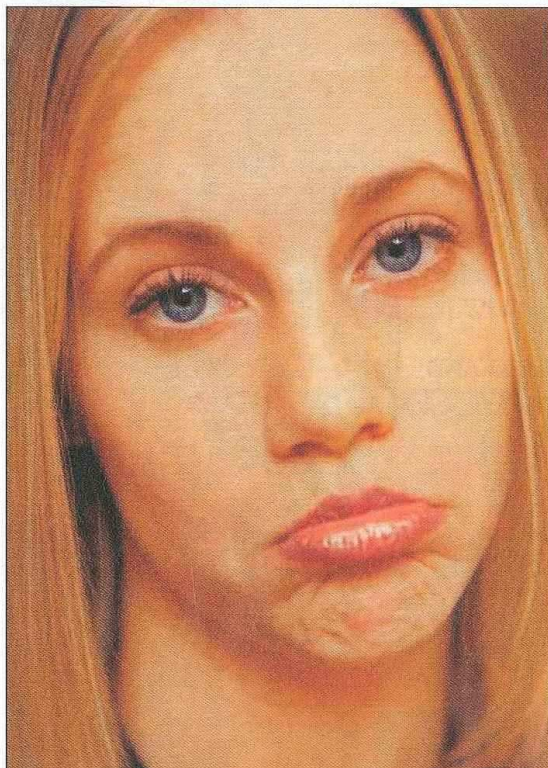
The group was recently recognized by the staff at ChildNet at a celebration in their honor. Emilio Benitez, President and CEO of ChildNet acknowledged the efforts of the four founders with certificates and plaques. The new girls were introduced to the staff



▲ **HIGH PRAISE** ChildNet executives and staff honor the founders of Project 1841 with plaques and certificates. Left to right: Ilana Wolpert, secretary; Alex Rubin, founder and president; Alli Weiss, publicity; Alexandra Kaplan, treasurer.

and welcomed on board, thrilled that a new generation of girls will be working with the agency. "The girls of Project 1841 are remarkable," says Benitez. "Their generosity and commitment to providing bags stuffed with basic necessities for Broward foster teens truly makes a difference. We are grateful their work will continue with Caroline, Carly, Chelsea and Samantha, the second generation of Project 1841."

Project 1841 was featured on NBC 6 News in a segment by reporter Adam Kuperstein, called Live Positive. To view the segment, follow the link www.NBCMiami.com/news/local/Legacy-Lives-118965224.html To find out how you can help Project 1841, please visit www.Project1841.org or email project1841@yahoo.com To make a donation, please send a check, payable to ChildNet Independent Living Program (write "Project 1841" on the memo line) and mail to ChildNet, 313 N. State Rd. 7, Plantation, FL 33317, Attention Jessica Walter. You can learn more about foster care by visiting www.ChildNet.us



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