

# The Orange Duffel Bag Foundation

Fostering Hope for **At-Risk Teens**

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF KEVIN GARRETT

WRITTEN BY BY CARL DANBURY

## Abuse is a relative term.

It can be physical or psychological, but nearly every time it's intrinsically emotional.

For orphans, foster children and other at-risk teens and young adults, emotional scars from abuse or neglect are omnipresent. The individual stories are messy, even nightmarish.

Sam Bracken, a former offensive lineman and All-ACC academic team performer at Georgia Tech and now global director of media publishing at Utah-based FranklinCovey, has such a story and details much of what he endured during his formative years in his book, "My Orange Duffel Bag: A Journey to Radical Change."

Bracken was the product of rape, was set on fire by a stepbrother at age 5, endured beatings by his stepfather, learned to drink alcohol and smoke marijuana at 9, was sexually abused by a friend and, at the age of 13, had a 21-year-old girlfriend.

After a partying binge one night, Bracken collapsed at track practice and decided it was time to change his life — forever. He didn't want to become like other family members who were headed for destruction; he gave up drugs and alcohol and embarked on a personal journey of healing, redemption and hope. Two years later he was kicked out of his house by his mother, so he

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Eventually, Bracken was able to find a foothold on life's right path, thanks largely to people who intervened on his behalf along the way, such as a teacher who discovered he needed glasses when he was 14 and a friend who opened his home and offered him a taste of normalcy. Bracken graduated high school with a 3.9 grade point average, was inducted in the National Honor Society and was named an all-state performer in both football and track. He was one of the lucky ones.

"I have been really fortunate in my life to be helped by a lot of different people ... [There is] nothing I could do to repay those people who helped me," he admitted. "I decided about 10 years or so ago that I had to do something to help others, to sort of pay it forward."

A few years ago, Bracken and co-author of the book, Echo Garrett, created the Marietta-based Orange Duffel Bag Foundation (ODBF), a non-profit organization that provides coaching, training and ongoing mentoring to at-risk youth aged 14 to 24 while offering hope and an opportunity to enrich their young lives.

Bracken is one of the organization's spokespersons and has personally interacted with more than 2,500 young adults during the past three years by sharing his story of abuse, homelessness, evolution and faith. His 7 Rules for the Road provides the basis for the curriculum now taught to youths in foster care in both Georgia and Utah, where Bracken currently lives.

### Big Dreams, yet Big Obstacles

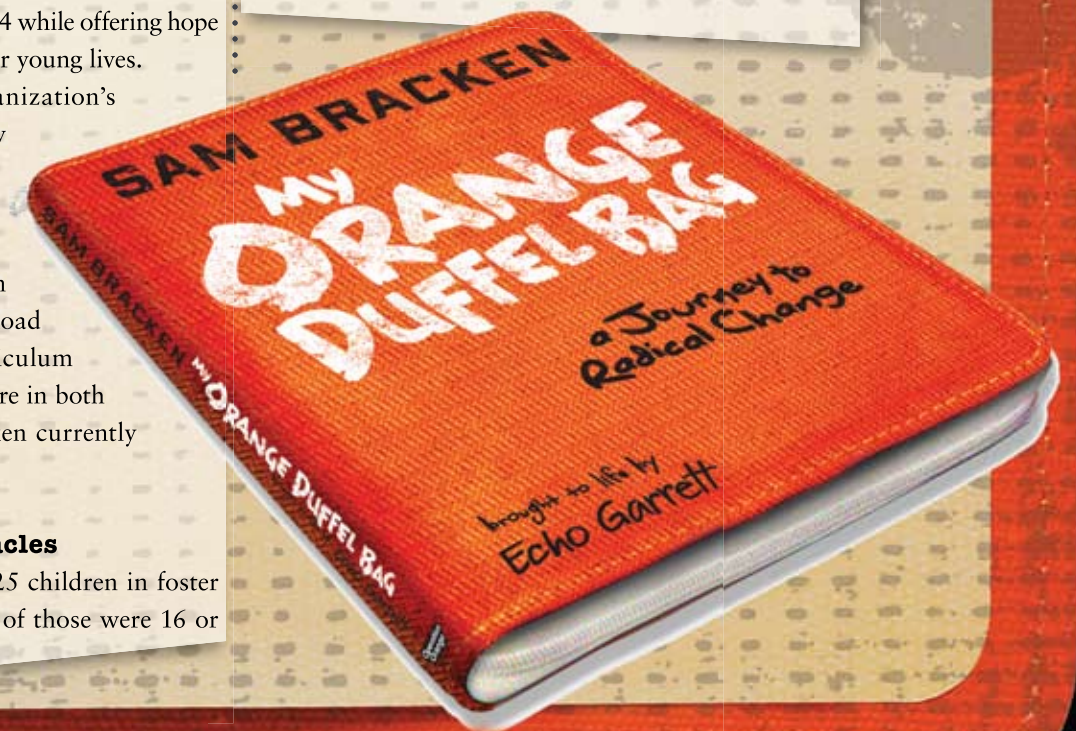
As of March 31, there were 7,125 children in foster care in Georgia, and 17 percent of those were 16 or

older, meaning their chance for adoption or finding a caring foster family is marginal. Sadly, many kids in the foster care system or those who have aged out of it have backgrounds similar to Bracken's.

Gi'Nia Stone, 19, was abused by her mother in Warner Robins at the age of 6 and spent a year in foster care before her grandmother adopted her. At 14, she was abused again, was tossed back into the system, and has lived in a dozen different homes in the past five years.

"I never looked at them as home. They were just places to stay. I always was with a single parent, not in a family situation," Stone said. "Some would tell you, 'I already got paid for this month, if you want to run away, you can do that, but I have been paid.'"

Thankfully, Stone's last foster care mother, Kimbly Hutchins, founder of Seeds of Love, provided Stone with support and a safe environment. Stone graduated third in her class and enrolled at Decatur's Agnes Scott College last fall. She wants to be a pediatric neurosurgeon.



Shalisa Walker  
Orange Duffel Bag Foundation Graduate

we were able to build a bond with other kids who were involved ... Each of us had been through a lot and this was our opportunity to make a change to better ourselves.”

“I was already undergoing my own transformation and Sam’s book confirmed to me that I was on the right path,” Mensah continued.

Stone said that the program taught the students not to be handicapped by the past and to push themselves to look for opportunities to help others.

“[“My Orange Duffel Bag”] ... was so deep and it touched us. When Sam came and told us his story, I think we all were more open to him. That’s why we go back as graduates and as mentors. I want to be inspiring and to help push others,” Stone said.

Bracken said that his story elicits varied reactions from the young adults he speaks with during formal or informal sessions.

“I often hear, ‘you think you had it bad?’” Bracken said. “I grab anything nearby and hand it to them and say, ‘Here is your trophy. Yeah, you had it bad, worse than me. Now, what are you going to do about it?’ Most of the time it is the first time anyone has called them on it, and it seems to make a big difference. They can spiral downward or seek achievement. The choice is theirs,” he said.

Despite the coaching, personal achievements and setting a course for their own future, even those who attend college have continual obstacles. For instance, Mensah is having difficulty adapting to his new surroundings, while Stone is having trouble meeting the financial obligations at the private college. She recently moved into the United Methodist Children’s Home near the Agnes Scott campus. While other college students may look forward to holiday breaks for Thanksgiving and Christmas, consider what happens to those young adults with no families when the dormitories and cafeterias shut down.

#### **The Support Network**

When Echo Garrett of East Cobb was 13, her parents intervened on behalf of two children living in a group home, and she became acutely aware of the problems

“Coaching is about making good, daily decisions, and training the kids to have a thought process that helps make those good decisions.”

**Echo Garrett,**  
Co-Author, “My Orange Duffel Bag”

associated with foster care children. She and her husband, Kevin, did a lot of volunteer work with orphans and children at risk, and many of their friends had adopted children. They, too, planned to adopt, but when Kevin was involved in a serious car accident, that dream went away.

“We prayed together that God would give us an opportunity to amplify what we had been doing for kids at risk, and it was literally that week that I connected with Sam Bracken,” Garrett related. “When I met Sam, I knew that this was a very specific answer to a very specific prayer.”

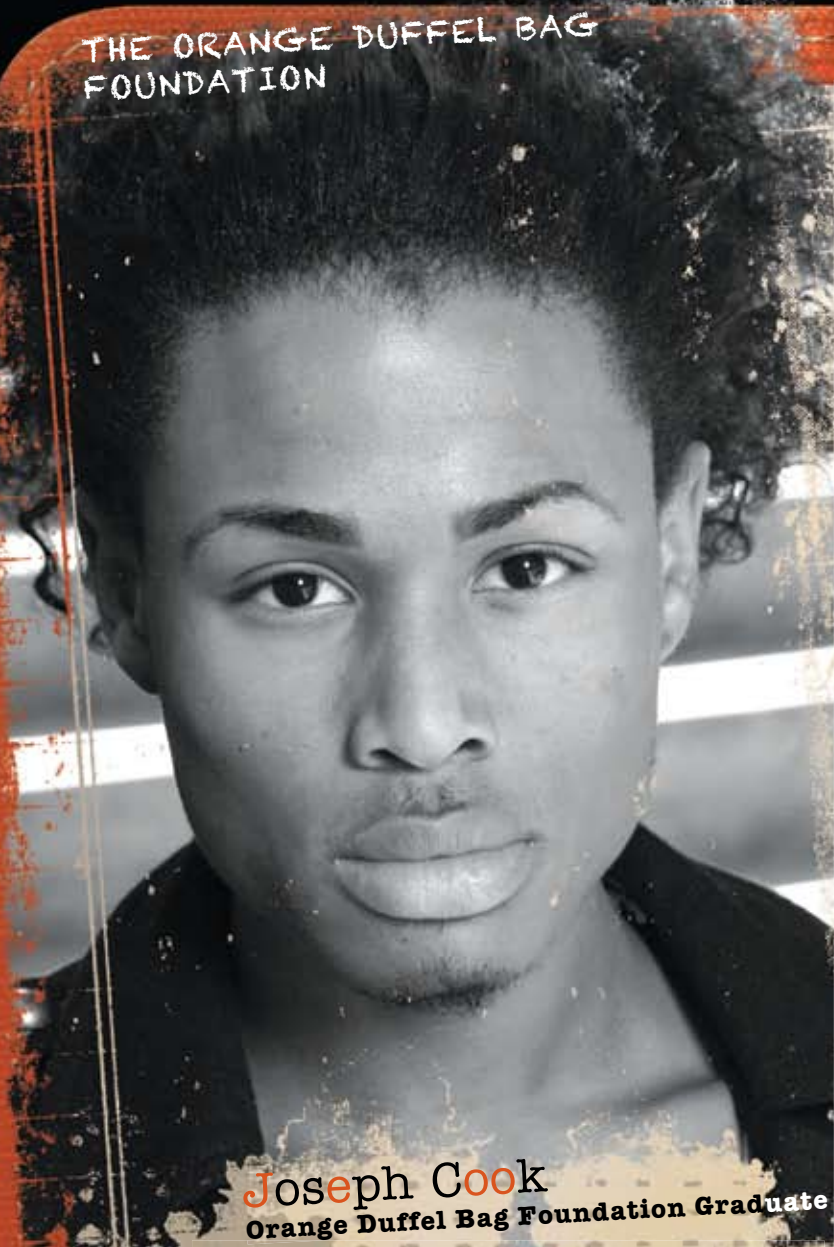
Garrett brought Bracken’s story to life while writing “My Orange Duffel Bag,” and the idea for The Orange Duffel Bag Foundation was born.

“The reality is that not every 18 year old is equipped to deal with all of life’s challenges, particularly those who have come from an unstable background,” Garrett said. “We want people to understand what barriers these kids face coming out of foster care. We wanted to make the orange duffel bag a symbol of hope for kids.” Garrett and Bracken originally planned to provide resources to each child through corporate support, but soon realized what the kids really needed was coaching.

“Coaching is about making good, daily decisions, and training the kids to have a thought process that helps make those good decisions,” Garrett said.

Cindy Hunsinger, ODBF’s director of coaching, helped develop a curriculum that helps these young adults to think differently.

“We help them see another perspective that allows them to believe in the possibility of a life beyond the street or a life beyond poverty. Essentially, we are teaching them a new language — inspired thinking. We want to help kids lock into a dream and a vision, and be excited about the direction of their lives,” Hunsinger offered.



**Joseph Cook**  
Orange Duffel Bag Foundation Graduate

Sabastian Mensah is a freshman pre-med student majoring in biology at Paine College in Augusta. He hopes to be a physician one day, too. He made A’s in high school despite entering the foster care system four years ago. Sebastian’s father, a refugee from Ghana, was psychologically abusive to him. Mensah was placed with three different foster care families in a four-year period, but found a nurturing environment.

“I never was in a group home. I was fortunate that every home I stayed in saw the goodness in me and wanted to help me become a good person,” he said.

Both Stone and Mensah went through ODBF’s 12-week curriculum.

“It’s a family-oriented program,” Mensah offered. “Every person seemed to really want to help you and

# body

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THE ORANGE DUFFEL BAG FOUNDATION

"We are trying to promote the empowerment of these kids, for them to be self-reliant, self-sufficient and to have a clear direction of where they can take their lives ... We are providing a community of trustworthy individuals, including professional coaches, youth advocates and peer advocates, so they have a place to call to get support."

Richard Becker, a 50-year educator and director of Chrysalis Experiential Academy in Roswell, used "My Orange Duffel Bag" in the classroom. He had spent years trying to find an applicable instructional piece for his teenage students.

"I believe every teen is at risk. This book is important for every single student ... In our society today kids have to be educated in making smart — or the right — choices," Becker stated.

Part of the Chrysalis curriculum is entrepreneurship, where students run a business related to the school itself. A few years ago, after meeting Bracken, the seniors voted to donate

Sam

proceeds from an annual art event to the fledgling Orange Duffel Bag Foundation. The \$500 check was the foundation's initial donation.

**Kindred Spirits**

Joe Bushey, president and CEO of POS World, Inc. and INTOUCH Interactive in Atlanta, not only donates his time, energies and financial support to Chrysalis, but also is a major benefactor of the ODBF. He supplies students that graduate from ODBF's 12-week coaching curriculum with a fully loaded laptop computer.

Bushey, now 37, escaped the clutches of a violent stepfather in Detroit when his mother moved his siblings and him to Ozark, Ala., as a teen. Bushey moved out his mother's home at the age of 16 to lessen her financial burden and to avoid constant battles with his brother. He took up residence in a converted slave cabin, got a job at a McDonald's and began supporting himself.

His remarkable two-decade ascent to business leader placed him squarely in the path of Sam Bracken. The pair hit it off while working on a consulting project together, and eventually exchanged their personal stories. Soon thereafter, Bushey agreed to help the foundation and to mentor the kids.

Bushey said the details of his situation as a teen are often exactly what the kids in the program need to hear.

*Continued on page 26*



"My Orange Duffel Bag" Co-Authors Sam Bracken (Far left) and Echo Garrett (Far right) with friends Susan and Jeff South

**Upcoming Events to Benefit the Orange Duffel Bag Foundation**

1

**Holidays of Hope**

Nov. 23 – 27

**Château Élan Winery & Resort**

Those who grow up in foster homes, group homes or orphanages often miss out on traditional holiday gatherings, bountiful tables and meaningful gifts. The Orange Duffel Bag Foundation, with the gracious assistance of other Atlanta-area organizations, has created a new initiative, Holidays of Hope, to provide college students and select others who have aged out the system the opportunity to spend Thanksgiving free-of-charge at local hotels and resorts. Local volunteers and mentors will tend to these young adults during the holiday break. Georgia's first Holidays of Hope will take place this year at Château Élan Winery & Resort in Braselton with accommodations, food and other amenities provided by Château Élan, media sponsor *Points North* magazine and other organizations.

In addition, the foundation has been named the charity of choice by the Zoma Atlanta Half Marathon & 5K race, to be held at Château Élan on Nov. 26. For complete details on how you can support The Orange Duffel Bag Foundation at this event, visit the Special Events page at [www.ptsnorth.com](http://www.ptsnorth.com).

2

**"World of Possibilities" Gala**

Dec. 4, 6:30 – 10 pm

**The Delta Air Transport Heritage Museum**

This spectacular "around the world" gala will help older foster kids to new heights. Delta's Hangar One will be transformed into a whirlwind journey across the globe, as guests sample food and wine and enjoy live entertainment. A silent auction is also part of the festivities.

Corporate sponsors include Xerox Foundation, POS World, CSI Creative Solutions Inc., Phenomenal Events By Bolden & Co., Social Eclipse and Kevin Garrett Photography. Partners include the Fanning Institute of the University of Georgia, Clark Atlanta University and University of Utah. Order tickets (\$75/person) via <http://worldofpossibilitiesforyouthinfostercare.eventbrite.com>.

3

**The Orange Duffel Bag Holiday Brunch**

Dec. 11, 11:30 a.m. – 2 p.m.

**Dal Cuore Restaurant, Johns Creek**

Enjoy a spectacular holiday brunch complete with wine pairings at one of the best new restaurants in the Northside. See a wonderful array of new organic products that will be sold to benefit the foundation, as well as the spectacular raffle prizes offered during the festivities. Please call 678-867-0854 or email [mail@dalcuorerestaurant.com](mailto:mail@dalcuorerestaurant.com) for reservations, and visit the Special Events page at [www.ptsnorth.com](http://www.ptsnorth.com) for more details.

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“You can come through enormous obstacles and turn out OK. Some will have better opportunities than I did. I literally had no one in my life encouraging me,” Bushey said.

Bushey said that foster care youths need someone to help every day.

“It’s an urgent need. If you let that time go by, some of these kids are inching closer and closer to being damaged beyond coming back,” he said. “The earlier you can impact these kids, the better. When you are talking about kids who are 13, 14, 15, the level of difficulty to reach them becomes harder.”

Bracken said helping kids change is not a singular event, but rather a process.

“Helping kids at risk is messy. They have issues. Psychologically or academically, they are a little behind others at the same age. They could have addiction issues. We realize many people don’t like to deal with mess. But your legacy isn’t how much money you’ve made. The relationships you’ve made are your legacy,” he offered.

In the end, financial support is vital, but time is the contribution that everyone can invest, according to Garrett.

“Sam has lived with what we are teaching. With a caring adult, a child can transform their life ... If you don’t make an investment of time, you might never know the possibilities of who that person could become,” she said. **PN**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

961 Bridgegate Drive  
Marietta  
800-598-5150  
[www.orangeduffelbagfoundation.org](http://www.orangeduffelbagfoundation.org);  
[www.myorangeduffelbag.com](http://www.myorangeduffelbag.com)

**Number of children currently in foster care in Georgia:**

• 17 and under = 8,091; 14 – 17 = 1,194; 18 – 21\* = 493

\* Extended Support Services in which youth aged 18-21 may continue to receive foster care services

**Total youth the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) of the Georgia Dept. of Human Services has placement responsibility for is: 8,584**

**Number of current foster parents in Georgia: 3,892**

**Current number of children in foster care that are in group homes vs. individual homes:**

• Group homes: 1,385; Individual homes: 6,465

Individual homes include non-related foster parents, relative homes and pre-adoptive homes.

The above statistics were provided to Points North upon request by Lisa Marie Shekell, director, Legislative Affairs and Communications, Georgia Department of Human Services.



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