

# Foster kid suitcase giveaway gets award

## USA Weekend honors Durham's SaySo for helping youngsters smile

*BY **KATIE HAGEN** [abc@heraldsun.com](mailto:abc@heraldsun.com); 419-6684*

**4/17/2005**

In the world of foster care, it's easy to feel forgotten.

But a Durham-based youth organization made a big difference in the lives of 2,284 foster children last October by providing them with something simple -- suitcases.

As a result, Strong Able Youth Speaking Out, or SaySo, has won one of 503 awards given by USA Weekend for its "Give a Child a Smile" suitcase project.

SaySo is a statewide not-for-profit organization for people ages 14 to 24 who are or have been in out-of-home care.

There was no question about what SaySo would do for its service project on Make a Difference Day, said SaySo executive director Nancy Carter.

One of the worst things for young people in foster care is having to move their belongings from home to home in garbage bags that often break.

"When you put all of someone's belongings in a trash bag, it sends the message that they're trash and they should be thrown away," Carter said.

SaySo's 284 members all know the humiliation of that experience and wanted their project to benefit foster kids of all ages, not just teens. The "Give a Child a Smile" suitcase project was born.

Carter said that on Make a Difference Day on Oct. 23, 2004, SaySo set up 18 suitcase collection points across the state and held a rally at Holy Infant Church in Durham.

The suitcases were filled with toothbrushes and toothpaste donated by local dentists, teddy bears, T-shirts and even a love note written by SaySo youth.

"The little kids were really happy," said SaySo member Peaches Sanders, 20, who entered the foster care system herself while carrying her belongings in a trash bag.

Although the goal was to collect 5,000 suitcases and duffel bags, enough for every foster child in the state, SaySo and 288 volunteers still collected more than 2,000 bags in one day -- no small feat.

Carter said that many donors said, "This is such a simple thing. How come we didn't know about this?"

"People have kept this population silent and invisible," Carter said. "This project made an invisible population visible."

Many of the bags were distributed from the collection points the same day. Many foster children came with their families to pick out a suitcase. By Thanksgiving, just one month later, all the bags had been distributed.

The appreciation was astounding.

"Each of our children arrived at our home with their belongings in trash bags ... which upset my husband and myself," said a foster mother in an e-mail to Carter. "The five of them are delighted to have a new carrier," she said.

Carter said that many of the SaySo youth who grew up in foster care believed that people didn't care what happened to them.

This project meant just as much to them as it did to the children who got suitcases.

"They couldn't believe how much people wanted to help," Carter said.

SaySo is planning to do the project again this October and has already formed new partnerships.

"We want to keep that momentum going," Carter said.