

The Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange is a program of Judson Center and is funded by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. To learn about foster care adoption and view photolistings and videos of waiting children, visit our website at www.mare.org.



Rising to the top

Meaningful narratives for youth start with you

STORY BY **LAURA RUTKOWSKI, MARE SUPERVISOR**

A waiting child's photolisting narrative is the first glimpse into his or her life for prospective adoptive families.

When you supply the basic information, MARE turns it into a narrative. However, many times it's better if MARE's communications specialist has more information, and that's where you can take the initiative.

MARE provides the "All About Me/What I want people to know" and "What Others Say" worksheets as suggestions for content, but these are just guides. Not every narrative needs to list the child's favorite foods, toys or holidays.

Think about the child's strengths in a variety of different areas of his or her life. Any information that can help families see the child as unique and special can help make meaningful connections and lead the child to a forever family.

Check out some of these suggestions from AdoptUSKids:

- Accomplishments or milestones.
- What matters to the child.
- Ways they are connected to the community (such as church, ROTC, scouts, YMCA).
- Cultural connections or languages they speak.
- Positive quotes – from the child or people who know him or her.
- Important connections such as with siblings or grandparents.
- How a family might make a difference in their life.
- Appeals to families that encourage them to act.

For more information on creating strength-based narratives, check out AdoptUSKids, <https://adoptuskids.org/for-professionals/writing-childrens-narratives>

Be sure to include high quality photos

When you and a child on your caseload want him or her to be featured in a MARE periodical or a news story, make sure that we have a high resolution image of the child on hand.

A high resolution image generally is around 300 dots per inch, but you don't actually need to know this to get a usable photo. All you need to know is how the photo is taken.

One way to ensure you have a high quality image is by registering the child for the Michigan Heart Gallery (see contact information at right). Professional, volunteer photographers take these pictures for the Heart Gallery as well as for possible use in other forms of recruitment.

Another way is to make sure you take a child's photo

using a digital camera instead of a cell phone. While cell-phone manufacturers have increased the resolution of the photos taken with their devices, the quality of the images vary widely, so be sure to use a digital camera if possible.

If you are unsure of the quality of the image that you've taken and want more information, you can contact MARE Communications Specialists Hannah Dunne and Mark Fisk at hannah_dunne@judsoncenter.org or mark_fisk@judsoncenter.org. For information about including a child on your caseload in the Heart Gallery, contact Jessica Thompson at jessica_thompson@judsoncenter.org, or you can call 800-589-6273 and ask to talk to one of them.

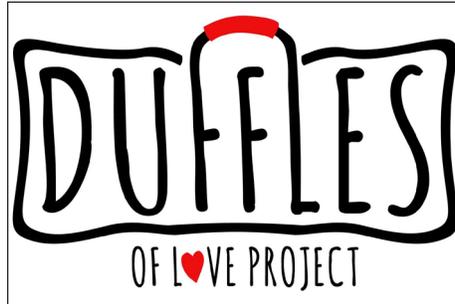
Fostering positive change for foster care youth

Adoptive mom shows it's in the bag

Concerned about the black plastic garbage bags that many youth in foster care are forced to use as suitcases, Jamie Rynearson decided to do something about it. The adoptive mother from Midland co-founded the Duffles of Love Project, which replaces those garbage bags with duffle bags filled with many basic supplies to comfort children living in foster care.

"We immediately knew this project had the potential to change some lives," Rynearson says.

"When children receive a duffle bag, they are excited and surprised," says Vyctoria Sanborn, adoption/foster care supervisor for Oakland Family Services.



Because the bags come supplied, they can help workers who often scramble to find basic needs for children coming into care or changing placements.

"It's so easy for workers to take everything to the kids," says Sanborn, "and it also helps because then we actually have items to give out when we have someone in need."

The idea for the Duffles Of Love

Project is rooted in a video that Rynearson and her husband, Lance, watched during their pre-adoption training. The video depicts a young girl removed from her home and placed into foster care.

"Through the entire video she moves her belongings around in garbage bags," Rynearson says.

Rynearson not only believes that the garbage bags cast a negative image for children but also belittle the value of children's belongings to others. When she and Lance initially met – and eventually adopted – their daughter, Rory, the negative impact of the garbage bags and the need for something better emerged.

See **Duffles Of Love**, page 4



Rory Rynearson, adopted daughter of Jamie and Lance Rynearson, provided much of the inspiration for the Duffles Of Love Project.



Exceptional Recruitment Award

The MARE team respects and admires Michigan's adoption specialists for the amazing work they do for waiting youth, so with each issue of the Professional Provider Newsletter, we feature an adoption specialist nominated by a MARE staff member for an Exceptional Recruitment Award.

Now let's meet the new Exceptional Recruitment Award winner ...

A worker who can take a bow

Louise Ponder uses creative methods to bond child and family

Louise Ponder has been working creatively with a new adoptive family and allowing them to build a relationship with a youth, starting with being a pen pal.

Louise has helped facilitate the letters and contact between the youth and the family alongside their navigator, licensing worker,

guardian ad litem, therapist and foster care worker. With each letter, set of pictures and Bible verses exchanged, the family and youth have learned what they have in common!

Louise has embraced this non-traditional contact as a way for the youth to express himself,

process his past and set goals for his future.

This whole team approach with good communication is proving to be a successful recruitment tool by helping the child build his support network regardless of what the outcome may be.



The Rynearson family.

Duffles Of Love, continued from 2
 “She was still in foster care and this was the last thing we wanted her to feel,” Rynearson says. “We wanted her to know that she had value and worth and that we recognized that. That day we purchased her a teal and gray duffle with her name embroidered on the side.”

From there, the bags of bliss idea emerged, and Rynearson formed a group of friends, including fellow co-founder and close friend Amy Cote, to establish Duffles Of Love and help launch the fundraising effort in February.

“Our team is made up of our most talented friends and family from around the country,” she says. “Together we handle everything

Items included in the bags

- Dental and body hygiene products.
- A blanket and stuffed animal.
- A flashlight, notebook and pen.

from our logo and website to physically stuffing and delivering the duffles.”

Since the project began in earnest in April, contributions made by businesses and individuals have helped Duffles Of Love purchase, supply and distribute 191 bags to agencies in Oakland and Midland counties. Oakland Family Services has received many of the bags, which have been distributed to

children already in foster care and those entering the system.

“We have been able to utilize them during initial placements, replacements and also when we receive cases where unlicensed relatives are providing care and they do not have a lot for the child,” says Sanborn. “Overall, this project has been extremely helpful and also helps spread the word about children in foster care in general.”

Workers can get involved in the project in a couple of ways. First, they can establish a Duffles of Love fundraising campaign through their agencies, Rynearson says. They also can make donations and share the Duffles of Love website and Facebook page.

Adoption celebrations around

This year, Michigan’s Adoption Day was Nov. 21. Among those celebrating Adoption Day were, left to right, Oakland County and Ionia County.

