

Filling Hearts and Backpacks

Jennifer Bruzek, Lisa Schroer, and Briana Sjodin are bringing light into the life of local children.

Story By Kirsten V. Freeman

Stacy is six and a half years old. She loves corn dogs and Cracker Jacks and going to the splash pad in the summer. She likes to watch SpongeBob and be with her friends. She loves school because that's where she is nourished both mentally and physically.

At home, she keeps a jar of peanut butter and a spoon hidden in her room under the pile of unclean blankets on the floor that she uses as a bed. Often that's all there is to eat at her home. She hasn't seen her dad in a very long time and her mom forgets dinner times and bed times and bath times and homework times sometimes....well, lots of times.

Stacy takes care of herself the best she can. One night, police people come to her home, and dressed only in her jammies, she is quickly taken from her drug-worn mother. Scared and confused, Stacy is brought to a strange office building. As arrangements are made for her care, one of the police people brings her a colorful backpack from Pockets of Hope. It is hers to keep and take with her to a new foster home. Inside... treasures! New "Frozen" the movie jammies just her size and a Belle doll from Beauty and The Beast, a fresh box of crayons and a coloring book about sea animals, yummy fruit snacks, a crystal night light, her very own shampoo and toothpaste, and to top it off, a soft, hand-made, cotton candy-colored blanket. And all hers for no one to take away.

In the dark world of abuse and neglect that over 500 Stearns and Todd County kids live in every day of every year, three women are bringing in a little light. It all started with Lisa Schroer's Sartell daycare which Jennifer Bruzek's and Briana Sjodin's children attended. It was Christmas 2013, and Lisa wanted to get her daycare kids involved in a child-centered Christmas purpose. She did some online research and came up with an organization that provides backpacks for kids who are entering the foster care system due to unsafe environments at home. Her daycare children went to work gathering items and money for the cause. Jen, a local social worker who works in child protective services, loved the idea and said, "I really wish there was something like this in Stearns County." Briana agreed. The three of them started talking about making it happen, and within months, the non-profit organization Pockets of Hope was born.

Since they donated their first backpacks to foster kids in need in May, 2014, several significant corporate and private partners have come forward to offer their help. DeZurik gave them more than \$5,000 from their annual 5K run a few years ago and, on top of that, opened their doors to provide them with a permanent, spacious and secure storage and sorting space for the now



Pictured above: Jennifer Bruzek, Lisa Schroer, and Briana Sjodin ready backpacks for children going into foster care.

thousands of items that go into the backpacks that are pre-packed for boys and girls age zero to teen as needs arise. No matter what age, everyone gets a mini flashlight and a night light. "That little bit of light can provide so much security," Jen explains. Bottles and books, sippy cups and stuffed animals, art supplies and toiletries, movies and games - the backpacks are all loaded up with good things and love.

Capital One recently provided dozens of high-end backpacks and their employees keep the Pockets of Hope shelves stocked with hundreds of home-made hand-tied fleece blankets that they make themselves. The local Kohl's Cares crew comes to help volunteer at the annual fundraiser hosted at the Blue Line in Sartell where baskets and goodies, also donated by local businesses and individuals, are raffled off to lucky winners. Many other groups and individuals come to them with gifts of backpack items and cash to support their efforts.

"Are we making a difference?" Jen asks, "I definitely think so. I see the kid's faces light up when they get something that's all theirs especially in the middle of a tough time for them. I would like to think we are making a difference in two ways. First

of all to the children themselves who are feeling they have a few small things in this world to call their own and secondly, to bring awareness to our greater community who can truly make an impact on kids in foster care in our area."

"We have eight kids between us," Briana says, "I think as moms, our hearts go out to these kids and if we can offer some comfort, that's what matters. That's our mission."

"It's important for us to help take care of other kids who are really in need of care and comfort and to set that example for our own children," Lisa adds.

Pockets of Hope collaborates with the Central Minnesota Child Advocacy Center which is a program at CentraCare that helps children when there is a concern of child abuse. It serves to preserve the dignity and spirit of the children by supporting, advocating for and educating families.

To date, Pockets of Hope has distributed more than 525 backpacks, which although a great achievement, sadly is only a fraction of the foster children who are in the system. "We're so appreciative for the support we've received," Jen says, "The more people hear about us, the greater the demand will be. We will continue to grow as we can to help meet the need."

To help, message Pockets of Hope on facebook or connect with them at their website at www.pocketsofhope.org.