



Ariel Sedlund (12), left, collects a teddy bear from Peer Counseling members, Elise Tran (11) and Matthew Chen (11), at the Mt. Carmel vs. Westview football game. Sedlund organized a toy drive to bring joy to foster children for Christmas, receiving 85 bears.

Sedlund holds toy drive for foster kids

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EDITOR IN CHIEF

Ariel Sedlund (12) looked at the photograph in her hands. She studied the face of her much younger self, hugging a baby doll in her arms with a smile beaming on her face. The photo brought her back to that moment, so many years ago, to one of her first Christmases, when she was still in foster care.

"I love Christmas now, but I used to hate it because it really sucked," she said. "I didn't have a family, and it just felt really empty."

She remembers how hard the holidays had been for her and how the simple gift of a baby doll gave her something she never really had before: a possession. Something to call her very own.

"All I could think of was that I would love to give that feeling to another kid," she said.

So, after speaking to her former Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), she decided to bring a Christmas toy drive to Westview. She emailed Area Administrator Scott Wild, and after meeting with him, she began making plans.

The original organization that had given Sedlund her first baby doll was Voices For Children, a nonprofit whose purpose is to better the lives of foster children in San Diego County. This year, the organization was accepting donations of teddy bears and gift cards for their annual holiday party. It was at this same party that

Sedlund was given her first baby doll.

After discussing her ideas with Wild, the two decided upon a plan for how to receive the most donations and get the word of the toy drive out. Sedlund's original idea was to have the drive at the largely anticipated, Mt. Carmel vs. Westview football game in order to reach the largest number of students, but Wild also suggested that she bring the drive to the two largest clubs on campus, Peer Counseling and Link Crew, and to make it a competition between the two.

She decided to focus on donating teddy bears, wanting to emphasize the importance of giving a foster child their own toy.

"I really latched on to the idea of a teddy bear because it's still personal," she said. "Every teddy bear is different and it's something kids can remember and feel comforted by."

So, Sedlund created a presentation explaining her story and then presented it to the two clubs.

When she was 3, Sedlund and her sister came under the foster care of her current parents. Sedlund remembers her first Christmas with them. The parents knew the sisters never really had a Christmas before, so they went all out. Sedlund remembers hours of gift opening, her favorite being a pair of strap-on roller skates she refused to take off.

"It's a very warm memory," she said. "That was kind of when I knew I wasn't going to really have another family after

that, because I wasn't even adopted and they were already so willing to give me all they could."

After six months of living with them, the parents asked the two girls if they could officially adopt them. Sedlund immediately agreed, wanting to finally be a part of a family, and the parents began to petition for adoption.

There are two cases when it comes to adopting a foster child: when the state has the right over the child or when the biological parents have the right. In Sedlund's case, her biological mother had the right, and she was fighting for them. The girls' biological mother had been fighting drug abuse and was in and out of rehab, which is why the sisters had originally been placed in foster care. The court process carried on and after three years of fighting, Sedlund's parents won. The girls were officially adopted in September, when Sedlund was 6 years old.

To celebrate the adoption, Sedlund says that the family exchanges presents and shares Thai food every Valentine's Day, marking the day the family met.

"When I met my parents when I was three, I remember feeling so comforted with them," she said. "It's a really special day, and reminds me how lucky I am to have the people that are in my life."

So, motivated by her own experience, Sedlund wanted to make a difference.

"Having been a foster child for six years, it has always weighed on my heart knowing that there are still foster kids

who don't have families," she said. "The holidays are really tough because it's just a constant reminder that there are other kids who get normal things that you don't have. It's always kind of burdening me, and I just always think 'what can I do to help them out,' because I have been like them and I know how much it hurts."

On Nov. 7, Sedlund, accompanied by her parents, stood by the ticket booth during the football game collecting teddy bears. Donors received free entrance.

"It was really overwhelming in a good way," she said. "I didn't really expect so many people to come out and contribute. By the end of the night we had two huge boxes full of teddy bears."

Peer Counseling Co-President Brian Inghilterra was inspired by Sedlund's passion and was eager to participate.

"When Ariel reached out to Peer Counseling for support on the toy drive, we were so excited to help," Inghilterra said. "We decided to participate in a friendly competition against Link Crew as well as create a competition within our own club to get as many bears as possible."

The two clubs had from Nov. 13 to Nov. 14 to bring in their bears. The total amount of teddy bears collected was 85 and Peer Counseling won.

Over Thanksgiving break, Sedlund plans to take all of the bears to Voices For Children, giving kids that she was once just like, a gift that will be far more than just a teddy bear, but something they get to call their very own.