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“Birthday Blessings” Takes the Cake

How one local charity is blessing the socks off Charlotte’s homeless children

By Erica Parkerson

Birthdays in Charlotte are typically celebrated in bouncy houses, bowling alleys and laser tag complexes. I have taken my children to parties like these, and I’ve hosted them. But it was a party I attended in early July on the lawn of the Salvation Army Center of Hope that truly took the cake.

Every month, the “Birthday Blessings” team, led by the unstoppable Amy Cervantes, a Charlotte wife and mother, host birthday parties for the kids who live in four Queen City shelters: Charlotte Emergency Housing, the Salvation Army Center of Hope, the Shelter for Battered Women through United Family Services, and the YWCA through the “Families Together” transitional housing program. All the children in the shelters who have a birthday during that month are celebrated. Occasionally, new families come with a child who had a recent birthday, and they are grandfathered into the program.

The Birth of a non-profit

It all started three years ago when Cervantes and her husband John began searching for a family service project that would involve their sons, Alex, six, Eli, three, and Adam, one. Cervantes called the Salvation Army Center of Hope, in uptown Charlotte, asking: “Do you have a way of celebrating the children’s birthdays?” The answer was no, and in the blink of an eye, “Birthday Blessings” was born.

Cervantes took action because she and her husband believe very strongly in giving back to the community. “We want our kids to learn the importance of giving back to others,” said Cervantes. “It feels so much better to give than to receive!”

John’s father was born on the south side of Chicago and endured a difficult upbringing. “Both he and my mother always instilled in me that old adage ‘to whom much is given, much is expected’ and that has translated into my and our life,” said John Cervantes. “Life is all about the journey and if we can reach one of these children and it plays a small role in helping their self-esteem, which will allow them to make a better decision then it’s worth it. We get so much more than we give.”

Community effort

They don't throw your typical pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey party! At the July bash I attended, "Hello" the Clown was on hand blowing bubbles and painting faces. A small amusement park-like fire engine ferried party guests around the campus. Part of the parking lot was reserved for remote control cars, which roared around mini-orange cones. Pastel paper balls hung like ornaments from the branches of an oak tree, and a birthday banner was wrapped around its trunk. Tables, decorated with red tablecloths and balloon centerpieces dotted the lawn. Beneath a copse of trees, a bouncy house rounded out the fun.

Like a bouquet offered from the community, every component of these parties is donated. Wolfman Pizza District Manager Bailey Dunmire delivered pizzas, wings and bread "styx" to the July party, and then stayed to help serve. Danny Schisler, owner of "Bounce Around" in Indian Trail, set up the bouncy house, and later chauffeured the fire truck. Corey Williams, the publisher and editor of the Raleigh-based Charlotte Baby and Child Magazine, donated colorful goodie bag buckets bursting with glitzy glam jewelry, temporary tattoos, balls, kazoos, and party hats.

Hello Kitty, Elmo, Sunshine Care Bear and Pablo from Nickelodeon's "Backyardigans" show, made appearances at the party, courtesy of Lonnie Hand, owner of Charlotte's "Copy Cats for Kids." "These children don't usually see things like this, so it's something that they're going to remember for the rest of their lives," said Hand. "No matter what happened earlier that day, the look in their eyes, when their eyes light up, it just completely melts you. I'll be completely drenched [with sweat] at the end of the party, but it's completely worth it."

Hand believes that if you feel blessed, then it's important to give back, especially in today's world. "With everything else that's going on, it kind of takes your mind off all the negative stuff," Hand said.

Church groups and vacation bible school programs help to facilitate the parties. The Raptor Center has sent feathered "ambassadors" to the Salvation Center of Hope, and the children interacted with fascinating birds of prey. At one party, guests learned how to dance the salsa! Sometimes the children are bused to cool places like Charlotte at Play and Space Kidets, to attend parties.

Eager to help

Bronwyn Pressley, who now serves as the "Birthday Blessings" coordinator for Charlotte Emergency Housing, never imagined the depth of need in Charlotte. After reading about the inspiring mission months ago, she contacted Cervantes and the two have since become good friends. "John and Amy have kind of put their life on hold for this organization," said Pressley. "They've taken on this huge project and have been doing this for two years really without any help. In the last year a lot of people have come on board to volunteer."

Stacey Ellis, one new volunteer, sailed in carrying a cake donated by Sinfully Sweet Bakery in Pineville. 3D rainbow squiggles popped out of the three-tier confection. When Ellis heard about "Birthday Blessings," she was in the midst of planning her son's birthday party. "We were agonizing over things like hiring a train and I had never given a second thought to kids who

don't have birthday parties – I just always grew up with that,” said Ellis. “I’m a mom with two kids and I loved the idea of helping bring a little bit of childhood back to these kids.”

Ellis once taught leadership development classes for the Charlotte Chamber and the Charlotte Regional Realtor Association. “An integral part of growing up is having a birthday party but also going to other people’s birthday parties,” said Ellis. “An important part of leadership is when you learn how to celebrate yourself and others.”

Cindy Ortiz, another new volunteer, moved to Charlotte from New York about one year ago. She has two daughters, 14 and 11. “I always put myself in that situation,” said Ortiz. “It is hard to even imagine going through that. I just want to do anything I can to help.”

Raising self-esteem and money for the cause

The mother of one daughter, 14 year old Aubrey, Pressley says it’s neat building relationships with the children she encounters. “They’re getting used to me, so when they see me, they will come up and hug me,” said Pressley. “We can be a support to them... and they can grow up and want to do better for themselves.”

When she first got involved, Pressley and her girlfriends shopped for presents and goodie bag treats, picked up pizzas, and then set up the party. “It was a time for us girls to be together and then we’d give back to the children,” said Pressley. Other families make volunteering for “Birthday Blessings” a family affair. Pressley reports that some children operate lemonade stands in their neighborhoods to raise money, while others, when their birthdays come, ask party guests to bring gifts for the children “Birthday Blessings” serves.

Pressley recalls one boy who opened his present and exclaimed, “Finally - my own football!” He was 13. On another occasion, a group of seven and eight year old girls received little purses, and treasured even the tissue paper inside. “All of them are so appreciative... they can’t say thank you enough,” said Pressley. “A couple moms are there every time and they hug on us and love on us too.”

This past Mother’s Day, Bath and Body Works donated 120 gift baskets to “Birthday Blessings,” offering the children of Charlotte’s shelters a special gift: the chance to give their moms a real present, something not made of paper and crayon. “These kids are so attached to their moms, you can imagine... that’s what they’ve got - each other,” said Cervantes.

School parties

Toy shops like Learning Express, (Stonecrest) and Toys & Co. (Cotswold), offer discounts to customers who want to put gifts in the buckets marked for “Birthday Blessings.” To date, Toys & Co. has collected almost 200 items. Mostly, Cervantes receives donations of presents and supplies by word of mouth. But their greatest need for cash donations stems from the 15 class birthday parties Cervantes throws across 20 different low-income Charlotte schools, every month.

“There are children in this community that live in campgrounds, motels, cars...” said Cervantes. With input from “A Child’s Place,” a social services program that works with the school

systems, Cervantes can pin-point which children are living in these environments, and cross-reference so children are not getting duplicate parties. “They tell us where the children are, what schools they’re in, what their ages are and when their birthdays are,” said Cervantes.

Armed with that information, every month, Cervantes stuffs approximately 400 goodie bags monthly in assembly line fashion in her home. Destined for the birthday child’s entire class, the bags contain M&M cookies, lollipops, juice boxes and party favors. “We deliver everything [anonymously] to the social worker at the school and they deliver it to the teacher and the child walks into school that day and they have a party with all their friends.” Pressley adds, “No one knows where it comes from, they think it comes from the parents. And the child gets to pass out all these goodie bags to their friends.”

The beauty is in the anonymity. “We want to foster that self-esteem,” said Cervantes. “These children feel so set apart from their peers and have to hide the fact that they live in a homeless shelter, but on this day they can say, ‘I have something to give you.’” The birthday child also receives a bag of gifts to take home.

Recently a social worker wrote to Cervantes, saying: “I just want you to know how much of a difference you’ve made in the lives of these children. For once in their lives these kids can just forget about everything and have just a happy moment.”

Generations of helpers

Alexis, who’s almost eleven, was a guest at the party I attended. In August, she will be the guest of honor at the Salvation Army Center of Hope party. “The people that come to celebrate the birthdays and the person that does the birthdays, I think they’re good people,” said Alexis. “If they weren’t good people, they wouldn’t come here and celebrate people’s birthdays.”

Someday, Alexis wants to help kids like “Miss Amy,” and she thinks big. “I would like to add animals to the theme... trained dogs and elephants, like a carnival,” said Alexis. In the meantime, Alexis is busy making a difference right where she is. “Alexis is the peacemaker here,” said Tiffany Stitt, a Boys and Girls Program aid. “She’s a very grateful girl.”

The “Birthday Blessings” team shows unconditional love to the children, says Karen Priolau, Unit Director for the Boys and Girls Clubs at the Salvation Army Center of Hope. “They make the kids feel loved and that’s the one thing all kids need. They’re saying I don’t need to know you, I don’t need to know where you come from, you are a child of God and I love you,” said Priolau. “The greatest gift that we can give is to be a servant, especially when it comes to children, because they are going to grow up and look to what they were taught as children and try to mimic that as adults.”

The children love singing “happy birthday” and blowing out the candles. “The joy on the face of a child who opens a present or blows out candles for the first time is a memory that hopefully our children will share with their children when they are talking about multi-generational responsibility,” said John Cervantes. “To me, if we can instill that in our kids as my parents instilled it in me, then I know that their legacy of social responsibility will continue long after we are gone.”

What began as a family service project is now a full-fledged non-profit organization, which the Cervantes operate out of their home. The family's formal living room has been transformed into a warehouse of supplies for "Birthday Blessings." Cervantes calls a corner of her children's play room, her office. But she keeps partying for Charlotte's homeless children.

"In a time in these children's lives when things are so unstable and so hard for them, for a few moments, they can have some fun and forget about the fact that life is hard for them right now and really isn't the way it should be," said Amy. "It's not their fault that they're in the situation that they're in. In a lot of cases it's not anybody's fault. A lot of these families are working poor. It's not that they've done anything wrong. Something's happened and they've ended up homeless."

So far, the birthdays of 350 children have been celebrated. "Your birthday is the one day of the year that is your day... that's the celebration of your life," said Cervantes. "To be able to say to these children, you matter, you count, we're happy you're here, your life is important... it raises their self-esteem... it makes them happier than you could ever imagine."

Want to help?

Visit www.birthdayblessings.org