

# An Undisguised Blessing

Birthday smiles are absolutely priceless. Seeing a birthday child's face filled with emotion can easily light up a room, and the laughter that accompanies that smile is simply music to the ear.

It's tough to imagine a child not getting to experience a celebration each year. But for over 2,500 homeless children in Mecklenburg County, birthday parties are not common. Or at least they weren't until Amy and John Cervantes conceived the idea of Birthday Blessings.

The non-profit organization began in the fall of 2005 as a family outreach project. "(Birthdays are) your day, your time," says Amy. "We've always been involved with the homeless; they've got a special place in our hearts." So when the family aimed to give back in a unique way without doing something that was already being done, celebrating homeless kids' birthdays seemed obvious. It was the perfect way to give back to the community with a project that could involve their kids, as well.

Two years into their "project," it was clear their idea was a hit. After assisting with The Salvation Army Center of Hope since the organization's inception, they were ready to branch out to additional shelters. Today they service six shelters each month with their Shelter Parties, a celebration that honors all birthdays that fall within that given month. Each member of the shelter is invited to the birthday bash where they enjoy a meal, an educational/enrichment activity, goody bags and, of course, birthday cake. Every birthday child receives gifts.

The Cervantes have been very blessed to find numerous sponsors and volunteers throughout the city who donate their time and services. "Lots of times we can bring in a party company such as Oogles & Googles or Mad Science, and some parties we can even do off-site at locations like Space Kidz," says Amy. For some of the kids, it's the first time they get a chance at trying a moon bounce, or even the first time they receive a birthday gift. Amy tells a story of a party where an 89-year-old woman got her very own birthday cake for the first time in her whole life.

With the Shelter Parties continuing successfully, the Cervantes decided to expand into a few new areas. Their Classroom Party Program allows them to provide all the party essentials – snack bags, paper products, goody bags, a cake and more for homeless children attending public schools. "We partnered with A Child's Place," explains Amy. "Through this partnership, we're able to get a list of the homeless children in the school system that are not in the shelters. We provide party items anonymously to a social worker who brings them to the child's teacher. Because it's anonymous, the other children in the class simply think the child's parents brought the items." Before the end of the school day, the birthday child also receives a bag of gifts.

Their most recent addition is the BIRTHday Blessings, a way that the organization reaches out to new moms living in shelters. Donations help provide diapers, wipes, formula and more to the new mommies – things they wouldn't normally be able to afford, but things we all know they need so dearly.

The organization that started as a family project has grown to a 501 (c)(3) non-profit that operates solely on donations and volunteers. To date, they've provided over 500 birthday parties in homeless shelters. Because Amy obviously can't be at every party (did we mention she's a mom of three under the age of 6?), their "adopt a party" concept has been a lifesaver. Groups (church small groups, Girl/Boy Scouts, school classes, etc.) or volunteers "adopt" a party and provide what they can for the celebration. Birthday Blessings fills in with the rest. Sometimes the volunteer group helps host the party, and other times outside volunteers simply take the party and run with it.

"As cliché as it sounds, it's seeing how these children feel," Amy says of the experience of providing the parties. "To see their faces when they are recognized ... their lives are so much harder than they should be. It feels so good to make a difference."

To help make a difference or to just find out about the organization, visit [www.birthdayblessings.org](http://www.birthdayblessings.org).

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