

## Birthday Blessings helps give families professional portraits



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*Photographer Sean Merewood taking portrait of 3 girls  
(Photo courtesy of Lorayn DeLuca Photography).*

Every December during Birthday Blessings holiday parties at area homeless shelters, needy children and families are treated to family photos, which are taken, printed, and provided as gifts in frames or frame craft kits that the children create. But this year, that annual party tradition will become part of something much bigger.

On December 12, photographers around the world will share their skills and give back to those who are less fortunate as a part of the Help-Portrait movement started by celebrity photographer Jeremy Cowart, and the greater Charlotte area was no exception.

Matthews-based Lorayn DeLuca Photography is spearheading a local Help-Portrait effort to benefit Birthday Blessings' annual family photo project. This Saturday, professional photo portrait sessions will be offered to women and families living at several of the area housing facilities that Birthday Blessings serves. The portraits will then be printed, packaged, and presented as gifts during Birthday Blessings celebrations across four area shelters during December.

Said Amy Cervantes, volunteer executive director and co-founder of Birthday Blessings: —To be able to gift the families we serve with professional portraits this year is truly a remarkable opportunity. Lorayn DeLuca and the team of photographers and project partners she has assembled are extraordinary—proof that when people come together for a common cause, even a seemingly small gift such as a family portrait can make an enormous impact in the lives of those less fortunate.

Under DeLuca's leadership, teams of local photographers, hair stylists and make-up artists are participating in the project. —When I first heard about the Help-Portrait project, I knew in my heart that I had to start a Charlotte region volunteer group in order to raise awareness about the existence of our homeless neighbors and domestic violence survivors. Together, with the help of project sponsors like Lifetouch National School Studios, Attitudes Salon, and the many enthusiastic volunteers who will participate in this important holiday event, we will make positive memories happen for needy individuals and families, said DeLuca. *(Cont'd)*

In addition to the four area shelters being served through the Help-Portrait project, Birthday Blessings will continue its annual holiday photo tradition at the remaining facilities it serves with support from key project partners. Biggs Camera and Image Center will sponsor photo processing services, and Kristen Venit, a local representative with Phoenix Trading, which sells specialty stationery and gift items, will donate photo frames.

Birthday Blessings, a grassroots nonprofit organization founded in 2005, currently serves homeless facilities across Mecklenburg, Union and York counties, as well as homeless elementary students throughout Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. It also supports the arrival of homeless babies through its Blessing Baskets Program. To date, Birthday Blessings has celebrated birthdays for more than 950 local homeless children, bringing joy and support to thousands of needy youth and families across the greater Charlotte area. The organization will begin serving Cabarrus County in January 2010 through a partnership with Smart Start/Cabarrus Partnership for Children. Birthday Blessings recently developed a national expansion program, with affiliate chapters getting under way in northeast Indiana; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Atlanta, Georgia.

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