

SEVEN TO WATCH | SHAPING OUR REGION IN 2010

Expanding birthday wishes

First in a series

By Peter St. Onge
pstonage@charlotteobserver.com
Posted: Sunday, Dec. 27, 2009



Amy Cervantes gathers up small presents to distribute at a birthday party hosted by Birthday Blessings for Florence Crittenton Services of North Carolina on Monday.

DAVID T. FOSTER III - dtfooster@charlotteobserver.com

At least once a month, Amy Cervantes pushes aside her paperwork for a party.

Sometimes, it's at a homeless shelter, where a young boy or girl celebrates a birthday hosted by Cervantes' charity, Birthday Blessings. Sometimes the party is in a classroom, where Birthday Blessings has arranged for students to hand out goodie bags as if they came from parents.

Cervantes started Birthday Blessings with her husband, John, four years ago. Now she has a staff of 20 volunteers serving nine shelters in Mecklenburg County. Each month, Birthday Blessings hosts 60 or so parties.

The organization is expanding next year into Cabarrus County, but also nationally to the Cincinnati area, northeast Indiana and Atlanta. Others across the U.S. are inquiring. With that interest has come the business of growth - trademark applications and licensing paperwork and grant applications. This is what happens when you become very good at doing good.

"It's been a whirlwind and a challenge," Cervantes says. "It is stressful, without a doubt."

So once a month, she grounds herself with a party. This month, it was at the Salvation Army's Center of Hope, with 35 kids and a handful of moms. The children sang Jingle Bells. Santa came, with Christmas stockings. "It's seeing that look," Cervantes says. "And I am so glad."

Vital Stats

Name: Amy Cervantes.

Age: 37.

Family: Husband John, three children.

Time in Charlotte: 18 years.

Where she came from: Vernon, Texas, and Scotch Plains, N.J., where she was raised.

Why she'll make news?

Birthday Blessings is expanding locally and nationally. The charity is expanding locally into Cabarrus County in 2010, and nationally into Cincinnati and Atlanta. Other cities across the country are visiting Charlotte to see how Birthday Blessings operates. Cervantes envisions a national network. "We can give them the formula, and we can all pool our resources and become stronger as a result."

The challenge facing Charlotte's nonprofits?

Duplication, Cervantes says. "I think we do such a good job filling needs that there is so much out there," she says. The problem, she says, comes out of the best intentions, but Charlotte would be better served if its generosity was more efficiently administered. "It can be dizzying for the average person to figure out what they want to do and how to do it," she says.

Most memorable Birthday Blessings birthday?

"There are moments or comments made by kids," she says. "You'd be surprised how many kids want to come out early and help out with their party. "I remember a little boy at Salvation Army Center of Hope. It was his eighth birthday. It was the only and first birthday he'd had. He was so proud. That's what stuck with me. When we cut the first piece of cake, he didn't want it. He wanted to give it out."

By Peter St. Onge
pstonge@charlotteobserver.com