

Charity gives kids birthday blessings

This family project to help the homeless has exploded into a busy, growing, nonprofit.

BY JENNIFER ROTHACKER
jrothacker@charlotteobserver.com

Birthday Blessings has a bit of its own celebrating to do these days.

What began as a family project to throw birthday parties for local homeless children has exploded, serving seven homeless shelters and thousands of children.

Since incorporating a year ago as a nonprofit, Birthday Blessings has thrown more than 300 parties. Last spring it moved into the public schools, anonymously providing birthday snack bags for homeless children to give their classmates on their birthday. It recently started giving baskets filled with food, clothing, diapers and more to homeless babies.

And founder Amy Cervantes of Mint Hill has even grander plans: expanding Birthday Blessings nationally so homeless children across the nation can enjoy the thrill of a birthday party.

"Once word got out, more people wanted to help," said Cervantes, a mother of three young children. "We hit this great spot where it became viral."

Amy and John Cervantes be-

gan throwing birthday parties for homeless children at The Salvation Army Center of Hope in August 2005. At first, it was a way to introduce their own kids to volunteerism.

The parties got so big – 60 children attended their second party – that the Cervantes invited friends to help. Word spread and more volunteers enlisted. Amy began calling for donations for goody bags and decorations. Party vendors from clowns to science shows volunteered their services.

Now Birthday Blessings hits each of the shelters it serves every month and celebrates the kids with birthdays. Everybody gets goody bags, dinner and cake. Every birthday child receives presents. John recalled a young boy who got a football as his present. At the end of the party, the boy offered to give it back, not realizing it was his to keep.

In late 2007, the Cervantes started putting together an incorporation plan. Last spring, Birthday Blessings became an official nonprofit and spread into six more shelters, including one in Union County. (Nobody with the organization draws a salary, although Amy estimates she works at least 40 hours a week.)

Birthday Blessings last spring also moved into the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, partnering with A Child's Place to provide class-



Amy Cervantes, co-founder of the nonprofit Birthday Blessings, rolls in cases of juice boxes to be packed for homeless students

room parties when a homeless elementary student has a birthday. For summer birthdays, the nonprofit works with a local camp for homeless kids.

And most recently, Birthday Blessings has begun compiling baskets to give new mothers who are raising infants in homeless shelters.

"This program was born of a

need we saw in the shelters," Amy said. "We'd see 6-month-old babies eating cheese off a pizza. Our hope, aside from giving the baby a positive and healthy start, is to also give that mother hope."

To cope with all this growth, Birthday Blessings recently moved into a new 1,200-square-foot office near

South End donated by LifeSpan, a nonprofit that works with developmentally delayed people. It now has 12 volunteer staff members. It's begun fundraising in earnest, recently receiving three foundation grants and taking in over \$18,000 at one event. All money raised goes to parties and programs. And, it's in the process of cre-

Birthday Blessings

Since 2005 ...
Birthdays celebrated: 607
Parties thrown: 356
Children served: 3,270
Presents given: 2,125
Cake slices served: 4,310
— SOURCE: AMY CERVANTES, BIRTHDAY BLESSINGS

Birthday Bash to benefit Birthday Blessings

Celebrate the one-year anniversary of MomsCharlotte.com, the Observer's Web site for parents, from 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Drop by Oogles-n-Gooles (103 Dover St., Pineville) for bounce houses, inflatable slides, a trackless train, clowns and characters, Mad Science demos, crafts and food. It's free, but a donation of a new, unwrapped birthday gift or party supplies or money to Birthday Blessings is appreciated. More details at www.momscharlotte.com

ating a franchise package that volunteers in other cities can purchase and learn how to launch their own Birthday Blessings. Proceeds would be funneled back into Birthday Blessings in Charlotte. Already, folks in Atlanta and Chicago have shown interest.

Girl Scouts will take 5 councils, make them one

BY STEVE LYTTLE
AND DAVID PERLMUTT
slyttle@charlotteobserver.com
dperlmutt@charlotteobserver.com

The Girl Scout Hornets' Nest Council officials announced at a luncheon Thursday that the 47-year-old council will merge with four sister councils in central and western North Carolina to become the Girl Scouts Carolinas Peaks to Piedmont council.

The Oct. 1 merger was ordered by the national Girl Scouts organization in 2005 as a way to economize councils and make them more uniform, said Katherine Lambert, Hornets' Nest executive vice president.

The Charlotte council, serving about 15,000 girls, will merge with smaller councils in Gastonia and Hickory, Lambert said.

"We all share the same media markets... the same papers, the same radio stations, yet we are two different organizations with two different cookie bakeries," she said. "The merger will economize in the back-office side of things and put additional resources toward girl services."

A new board and CEO will determine the headquarters for the merged council after Oct. 1, Lambert said.

At the luncheon, Susan Patterson, program director of the

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, received the Lifetime Achievement award.

A former writer and editor at The Charlotte Observer and now-closed Charlotte News, Patterson was among six award winners at the Girl Scouts' fourth annual Women of Distinction luncheon, held at the Westin Hotel.

Patterson joined the Charlotte News in 1971 and moved to the Observer when the News folded in the early 1980s. Patterson then was city editor and Mecklenburg Neighbors editor at the Observer until being named publisher and editor of Lake Norman Magazine in July 1989.

She then moved in July 2001 to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, where she has helped oversee its various charitable efforts in the Charlotte metro region.

The council also gave Kashmira Kale of Charlotte, a sophomore at UNC Chapel Hill, its Young Woman of Distinction award. Kale, daughter of Nandu and Dolly Kale, was born in India and moved to Charlotte at age 9.

Others given Significant Achievement Awards at the luncheon:

Carol Hardison of Crisis Assistance Ministry (Achievement in Community Building and Social Capital). During Hardis-

on's tenure, Crisis Assistance has helped a record number of people in need. The past year, she managed the distribution of more than \$7.5 million in emergency aid to prevent homelessness or loss of utilities for 16,549 families.

Mary Tribble of Tribble Creative Group (Achievement in Environmental Leadership). In addition to running her company, Tribble in 2000 cofounded and planned The Forum for Corporate Conscience and in 2006, she cofounded the North Carolina Conference for Women.

Alisa McDonald of Duke Energy (Achievement in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). McDonald is Duke's vice president of project development and services. She's been involved with many nonprofits including Communities in Schools, Junior Achievement and Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Molly Barker of Girls on the Run (Achievement in Sports, Health and Fitness). Barker began running at age 15, when she was "stuck in the girl box." She kept running and on July 7, 1993, she took off on a sunset run and found the inspiration that grew into Girls on the Run, which she started in Charlotte three years later. Today, 151 North American cities have Girls on the Run programs.

FOOD

■ from IB

Harvest. "We know people are struggling. We know people are asking for help who have never asked for help before."

The \$100,000 comes from the Critical Need Response Fund, conceived by the Foundation for the Carolinas as short-term emergency help for charities facing rising demand during the recession.

Carter said 1,600 pantry boxes will go to newly unemployed families, almost 1,800 boxes will be delivered to low-income housing sites for seniors, and thousands of nutritious snacks will be given to low-income and homeless children.

The boxes contain 20 differ-

ent items, including tuna, chicken, peanut butter, soup and canned vegetables.

A 27-year-old mother waiting for help at Crisis Assistance Ministry said the food would be greatly appreciated.

She's been scraping by on unemployment benefits and feeding her 14-month-old daughter with food stamps since losing her job at a Lowe's Home Improvement Center in February.

The woman, who declined to give her name, said she was also hoping for help with her power bill, because her lights were to be turned off Thursday.

"Right now, the way the economy is, anybody would take anything," she said as her daughter munched barbecue potato chips. "I'm definitely

going to need this program because my food's going to spoil" with the power off.

The critical needs fund and Food Lion are to be commended, said Carol Hardison, head of Crisis Assistance Ministry.

"They have given the agencies a message: We will not forget you, even though times are tough for all of us."

The critical needs fund raised more than \$2.7 million in donations over the past four months, starting with \$1 million from Family Dollar Stores founder Leon Levine and his wife, Sandra.

The project was conceived by Foundation for the Carolinas as short-term help for emergency charities that saw double-digit jumps in people seeking food, clothing and shelter.

space for Jinwright and his wife in the front row. One circled the main hall of the church, scanning the pews as the singing came to a crescendo. Some women had tears in their eyes. Other members embraced Jinwright as he and his wife walked in.

Thursday evening, the site of the pastors' conference

shifted to Jinwright's Greater Salem City of God in west Charlotte.

The pastors' consortium's Web site, which lists Jinwright as the group's "visionary," also removed Bishop Davis' photo.

This year's conference theme – "In God We Trust: The Era of New Beginnings" – has not changed.

REALTORS

■ from IB

who came up with the idea for the Housing Opportunity Foundation, the charitable arm of the Charlotte Regional Realtor Association.

Since 2003, the foundation had given away a house each year, but wanted to make more of an impact.

Through their church, Rempson and wife Rachel have escorted high school students to other cities on mission work to repair homes. He saw how their work changed lives.

He thought the concept might work for the foundation – only this time with his fellow Realtors.

"I thought if we had a hundred to volunteer and were able to repair five to 10 houses, we could call it a success and build on it," he said.

More than 700 stepped up. That means each of the 33 houses will have 20 to 30 volunteers, supervised by licensed home contractors who are also volunteering. Much of the supplies and paint have been donated by building suppliers.

The foundation has raised \$30,000 for the repairs. Rempson expects it will take up to \$40,000 to complete all the repairs.

The houses were identified by city and nonprofit housing organizations such local Habitat for Humanity chapters.

John Paul Soto is one of the



TODD SUMLIN - tsumlin@charlotteobserver.com

Today is Realtors Care Day, when 33 homes in Mecklenburg and Iredell counties will get much-needed repairs from volunteers who will be supervised by licensed contractors.

volunteers who jumped in early.

Soto is a Charlotte firefighter who sells real estate during his off time for Exit Realty South. The project, he said, packs a statement "that Realtors are not just about selling and buying real estate."

"This project is all about helping the communities where we live and work."

Soto will lead a team of 30 Realtors at a house on Barlowe Road in west Charlotte. The house needs all or part of the roof replaced, a dead tree removed and the yard cleaned up and landscaped.

The owner is a single mother of two sons. After bills and the mortgage, she can't afford the upkeep.

"She seems like a person really trying to make it work," Soto said. "We just want to help make her home feel like a nice place to come back to."

Stephanie Gossett, a broker

for Lake Norman Realty, is helping too. She liked the scope of the project: It's not so focused on Charlotte. The homes are scattered around the two counties.

Gossett, broker-in-charge of the Mooresville office, is leading a team of 24 volunteers from the company's four offices at a house in Statesville.

"They'll replace siding, and extend downspouts to move water away from the house. They'll also replace rotting wood from a chimney."

"Our projects in the past have been so Charlotte-centric," she said. "This is a very deliberate effort on the part of the foundation to make a bigger statement: That we are all going through tough times, but that we really care about our communities."

"It's an opportunity to spread our reach."

CHARGED

■ from IB

90 mph with the siren off. The speed limit on that part of Old Statesville Road is 45.

Investigators said they received conflicting statements on whether Proctor had his emergency blue lights on. But police said an in-car camera that starts automatically when the blue lights come on never activated.

N.C. law and department rules require that officers obey posted speed limits unless their vehicle's blue lights and siren are activated.

Proctor has been on paid leave as police do an internal investigation into the wreck.

"This is a most tragic incident for both the Robinson family and the Proctor family, who, along with their friends and relatives, have been impacted the most," police said in a statement Thursday.

Police and prosecutors on Thursday didn't have statistics on how many times officers have been involved in fatal wrecks. But they recalled only two other cases in which officers were charged in several decades.

District Attorney Peter Gilchrist declined to comment on the case against Proctor.

"We do not discuss the facts in pending cases," he said.

Proctor has been ticketed for speeding three times, according to court records, twice before he became an officer.

In June 2007, he was stopped in Cleveland County and accused of driving 63 mph in a 35 mph zone, according to court records. The charge was later reduced to driving 44 mph in a 35 mph zone and a clerk waived the case, documents show.

In October 2005, authorities in Gaston County stopped Proctor for driving 86 mph in a 60 mph zone, according to court documents.

The charge was later reduced to 74 mph in a 60 mph zone. Proctor received a prayer for judgment, which typically means the driver admits to an infraction, but does not receive points on their driver's license. Proctor paid \$110 in court costs, records show.

In the third case, Proctor was cited for driving 30 mph in a 20 mph zone in 2003 in Cleveland County, records show. He paid a fine and court costs, records show.

Proctor, who works in the department's north division, has not had any complaints lodged against him and has

never been disciplined by his superiors since becoming an officer, officials said.

CMPD said it conducted a background check on Proctor in February 2007 and hired him the next month.

The department looks into the driving histories of all prospective officers during background searches, officials said. A history of speeding tickets does not automatically disqualify a candidate from becoming an officer. But offenses such as driving while impaired, negligent accidents, incidents of road rage and recent violations could disqualify a job candidate, they said.

Sworn officers are not required to inform the department of speeding tickets they get on their own time. If their license is suspended or revoked or if they are cited for a crime more serious than speeding, such as drunken driving, they must inform the department.

On Thursday, Crystal Robinson said the family hasn't heard from Proctor.

"We forgive him, but it's hard to forget," she said. "You have to believe in God – that's the only way. If you didn't you'd be angry forever."

— STAFF WRITER TONYA JAMESON CONTRIBUTED.

JINWRIGHT

■ from IB

Observer on Tuesday when the indictment was filed in federal court.

But at the Bible study Wednesday, Jinwright told his flock that "all is well."

A security detail cleared a