

# She makes birthday wishes come true!

When Amy learned that kids in homeless centers don't have any birthday parties at all, she made it her mission to brighten their special days, creating celebrations that touch the hearts of needy kids and their moms!

**A**s Amy Cervantes lit candles on a birthday cake, everyone in the homeless shelter burst into song.

"Happy Birthday!" they sang, then one little girl began tearing into her presents.

There was a sparkly T-shirt. Some glittery bracelets. A whole pile of princess-y things! But instead of squealing "ooh!" the way Amy had hoped she would, the five-year-old guest of honor's face fell.

"Do I get to keep these?" she asked Amy.

A lump formed in Amy's throat.

"Of course," she replied. And in that moment, the Charlotte, North Carolina, mom knew that this little girl—and so many others like her in the shelter—needed this party more than she'd even imagined . . .

Her whole life, Amy had counted her blessings. She had loving parents. A wonderful husband, John. And a beautiful, healthy son, Alex. Yet so many people—too many—had far too little and needed so much.

Amy longed to give back. "I want to do something Alex can help with, too," she told John, "so he grows up knowing the joy of giving."

But what kind of project would keep a child interested? she wondered.

Suddenly, a memory played in her mind of Alex's third birthday party. It hadn't been a big deal—just some cake and balloons—but the look in Alex's eyes had been priceless. And it made Amy think: What do homeless children do for their birthdays?

## "Make a wish!"

**S**o that very next day, Amy called a local homeless shelter.

"Do you have a birthday program for the kids?" she asked.

They didn't.

"You do now," she replied. Because while she knew that the shelter was already doing the best it could to provide kids with a safe haven and the basic necessities, everyone deserves to feel special on their birthday. To celebrate. To be celebrated.

That week, Amy found a little extra in the budget. And soon, with John's and Alex's

help, she was shopping for trinkets and stringing tropical-hued streamers at the Salvation Army Center of Hope, throwing a celebration luau for all the children whose birthdays were that month!

"This is for me?" one girl, turning nine, marveled as calypso music played. And when Amy handed her a tote bag of little gifts, she first blinked in confusion, then held each one to her nose and closed her eyes, breathing in its newness.

It was almost more than Amy could bear. And now, seeing another little girl's face light up learning that she could keep her presents, Amy realized that while to many of us birthday parties might be just a simple childhood

joy and rite of passage, for these kids they were so much more. They were a way to forget their worries for a while. A chance to just be kids. And a reminder to keep making wishes, because sometimes they do come true.

So, locking eyes with John, Amy vowed to continue the parties—and Birthday Blessings (BirthdayBlessings.org) was born.

**Did you know?** You can make someone's special day even happier by sending them an e-card—they're free at MyFunCards.com!

## "You made us feel important!"

**A**nd with the kindness of friends and neighbors who kept asking, "How can I help?" Birthday Blessings was soon throwing a dozen or more parties each month at eight shelters across the area!

Like the pizza party for a 17-year-old, complete with karaoke and temporary tattoos. Or the first birthday celebration for a baby who'd known the shelter as her only home.

She didn't know she was turning one, of course. She didn't know she would've missed out if it weren't for Birthday Blessings. But as her mom, Akedra, watched her little girl dig her dimpled hands into her cake and smile, Akedra's eyes glistened with tears of gratitude and wonder.

"Thank you," she told Amy. "You know, sometimes people feel like if you're homeless, you're not worth anything. But you made us feel important. You made my day!"



"Everybody's special, especially on their birthday!" says Amy.

It's sentiments like that, Amy says, that explain why Birthday Blessings now has 400 volunteers who've joined to bring joy to birthday girls and boys who wouldn't otherwise have a party—volunteers who now include Amy's own little guys, Alex, now seven; four-year-old Eli and Adam, two.

"I wanna help, Mommy!" they say, stuffing goody bags with candy and crayons with as much excitement as if it were their own birthdays. Because when you give to others, Amy knows and her boys are learning, it's a gift to yourself, too.

That's why, until her real wish comes true—that no child should need their services—Birthday Blessings will be there. And they continue to grow: For children not in shelters but living in hotels, cars and campgrounds—whose parents struggle just to keep a roof over their heads and put food on the table—they provide goody bags to pass out to classmates on their birthdays. Today there are "baby blessings," too, where Amy surprises moms of babies born in homeless shelters with baskets of diapers, formula, teddy bears and onesies to welcome their new additions to the world and give them a happier start.

"The way I see it, everyone is here for a reason—and that means everyone deserves to be celebrated!" Amy says. "One mom told me that our party was the first time she'd seen her kids laugh in a long time; that it made everyone in the shelter feel like things would be okay. Getting to bring that hope and confidence to these children . . . it's just incredible!"

—Kristin Higson-Hughes

## Have a great birthday party on a dime!

Whatever our age, we deserve to celebrate! Here's how to have fun for less:

✔ **Plan a party for after lunch or dinner.** "Then nobody needs a meal, just snacks," says party pro Alison Trumbull. Find great food ideas in back issues of *Woman's World!*

✔ **Don't blow your budget on invitations.** Instead, send "e-vites" (at Evite.com or Celebrations.com). Or, for kids, write the party info on a balloon. When inflated, the balloon will reveal all the party details!

✔ **Decorate with things you already own!** A bed-sheet scattered with candy or sequins makes a lovely tablecover. Having a kids' train party? Set up your son's tracks around the party table for extra magic!