

Make It Matter

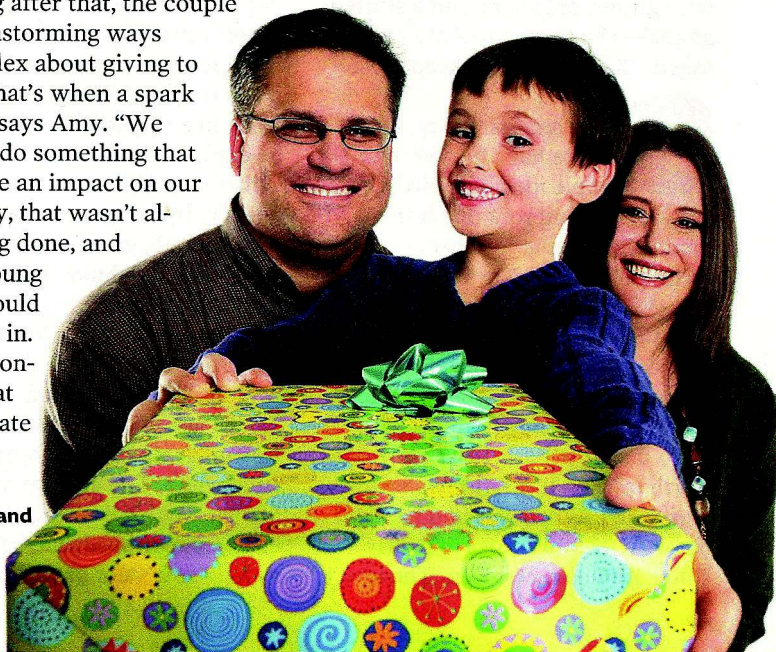
Happy Birthday to Them

One North Carolina couple wanted a way for their kids to help others. The solution: cake, candy, and candles. **BY MICHELLE CROUCH**

For John and Amy Cervantes, birthdays have always been a big deal—a welcome excuse to celebrate life. When their eldest son, Alex, turned three, in 2005, they invited 20 friends to a nearby park and hired a clown to paint faces and make balloon animals.

Not long after that, the couple were brainstorming ways to teach Alex about giving to others. “That’s when a spark went off,” says Amy. “We wanted to do something that would have an impact on our community, that wasn’t already being done, and that our young children could participate in. I started wondering what less fortunate kids do on

John, Alex, and Amy with a gift of joy.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY ADAM TAYLOR

39

their birthdays. The next day, we called a local shelter.” What they learned is that homeless children typically don’t do anything to celebrate. No cake. No gifts. No party.

Several weeks later, the family threw a party at the shelter for the children who had birthdays that

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month. They decorated, served cake, and led 50 kids in the limbo. Alex helped fill and pass out goody bags and presents. When one five-year-old opened her gifts—a pink shirt with glitter, bracelets, and a stuffed animal—she turned to Amy and asked, “Really? I get to keep these?”

Since that first party, the couple have turned their simple idea into Birthday Blessings, a nonprofit that hosts monthly parties at ten shelters in and around Charlotte, North Carolina. The group also delivers baby supplies to new moms in the shelters. And it discreetly sends treats to elementary schools so homeless kids can celebrate their birthdays with friends.

To date, Birthday Blessings (birthdayblessings.org) has thrown more than 500 parties and handed out over 22,000 favors to nearly 4,000 homeless children. The idea is

spreading fast, with affiliate chapters set to launch in Atlanta, Cincinnati, and northeast Indiana.

Recently, eager children watched volunteers at a Salvation Army shelter hang streamers and set out a huge cake. “Just look at their faces,” says Karen Prioleau, director of the center’s Boys & Girls Club.

“Even if it’s not their birthday, they love these parties.”

The children played bingo and made pictures with colored sand, then oohed and aahed as six kids opened their gifts. One girl pulled various

Hannah Montana items out of a bag while wondering out loud how volunteers knew she loved the popular teen singer (a lucky guess, says Amy). Another sniffed a stuffed puppy, incredulous that it was brand-new. And a 16-year-old boy lifted his new basketball in the air like a trophy. “I’ve never had a big party like this with my friends,” he explained.

Birthday Blessings is operated entirely by volunteers—they sort, wrap, set up, greet, and host—with Amy, a stay-at-home mom, at the helm. John juggles his career as an investment adviser while setting up the group’s affiliate network and running its capital campaign. About half of last year’s \$125,000 budget was made up of gifts from area supporters. The charity will take almost anything—toys, clothing, candy, paper products, baby items—as long as it’s not used. “These kids


40

readersdigest.com 2/10

never get anything new,” John says. “It makes a big difference to them psychologically.”

Last February, after years of operating Birthday Blessings out of their home, John and Amy moved the charity to a 2,000-square-foot office they lease for \$1 a year from a nonprofit with space to spare. There’s even a playroom for their three boys—Alex, now seven, Eli, four, and Adam, two.

Being part of this “labor of love,” as Amy puts it, is already making an impression on the boys. When Alex turned seven, his grandparents sent a birthday check. “The first thing he said when he opened it,” Amy recalls, “was that he wanted to give half to the birthday kids.”

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Going Strong

Every Wednesday,

Ruthie Culver puts on her makeup and jewelry, hops into her golf cart (or her Buick, depending on the weather), and drives three miles from her condo in Sun City, Arizona, to the Banner Boswell Medical Center for her four-hour volunteer shift.

Ruthie, 103, has racked up more than 1,200 volunteer hours since the day, six years ago, when she called the local hospital to ask if anyone there could use an extra hand. “I just got tired of staying home,” says Ruthie. “And I won’t quit until they make me.” To the staff, Ruthie is an icon of volunteering. If she can do this at her age, they wonder, what’s everyone else’s excuse?

Ruthie’s first gig was in



the ICU reception area, then in the cafeteria. These days, she folds laundry. While Ruthie’s contributions may seem trivial to some, says Julianne Mudric, director of volunteer services, “they free our staff to focus solely on the patients.”

Ruthie enjoys the camaraderie among the staff and her fellow volunteers. “I like that I get to talk to people while I’m there,” she says. An attractive single woman (she’s twice widowed), Ruthie giggles when she thinks about all the attention, especially from the men who flock around her.

Though she chalks up her longevity mostly to good fortune, Ruthie thinks she’s figured out one secret to a long, happy life: “Don’t have enemies. Try to look at the good side of everyone and not be critical. There’s nobody I don’t like.” Beyond that, she’s as much in awe of her health as others are. “I feel no different than I did 25 years ago,” she says. “I play bridge every Thursday, I love to read romance novels, and I watch the news every night. I have no aches or pains.” She goes in for a physical every six months. “The doctor sees me coming and says, ‘Just turn around and go back home,’” she says. “I don’t let him get away with that. I make him take my blood pressure.”

Petra Guglielmetti