



Party with a Purpose

Lisa Vasiloff wants to make sure no child's birthday is left behind. She lights candles, lifts spirits and gives the gift of kindness.

Life lessons In 2001 Lisa Vasiloff was trying to get her sons Max and Paul—then 9 and 7—more involved in community service. “I felt that if they started doing things for other people at a young age, it would become a normal part of life,” she says. But aside from nursing homes, most places didn’t welcome young volunteers. Lisa, along

with her friend Karen Yahara, vowed to find a kid-friendly cause.

Bright idea At the time Karen was volunteering for a group that provided child care for homeless moms. One day she learned it was a little boy’s birthday and asked what he planned to do for the special occasion. His blank stare gave her the answer: nothing.

Three’s company

Karen shared the story with Lisa. They also invited friend and accountant Carol Zwanger on board to handle money matters, then called a local shelter, Second Step. “We asked if we could sponsor a birthday party there with the stipulation that our kids could participate,” says Lisa. To raise money, each

“It makes me sad to leave a shelter when the kids are facing so many issues. But at least I know—no matter what their families are going through—the event has had a huge impact.”

woman held a wine-and-cheese night at her house and invited guests to learn about the shelter and donate money to their cause, Birthday Wishes, Inc.

The first fete They threw their initial bash in 2002—with cake, presents and art supplies—for a boy named Mohammad who was turning 5. “It was life-changing,” says Lisa. “His mom was in tears because she didn’t have money to buy him anything.”

Team effort Within two years Birthday Wishes was working with more than 10 local shelters to sponsor monthly events for the eight or nine kids at each facility whose birthdays fell within that time period. On party day volunteers

arrive with a cake iced with all of the birthday kids’ names. They bring group games as well as goodie bags with pencils, notepads, stickers and rubber balls for the kids to hand out. The first 45 minutes is spent on crafts, followed by singing and dessert and sometimes a piñata. At the end, the birthday kids open presents—usually a pair of pajamas and a stuffed animal or book, in addition to a present like a Lego set, or a gift card for older kids.

Growth spurt While the group currently holds parties at about 70 Massachusetts shelters, a potential grant may enable the program to expand to Rhode Island. And for Lisa and her team, that takes the cake. ●

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