Birthday Parties that Give Back

In 2002, Kate Darcy Hohenthal's daughter Sara started to receive invitations to her preschool friends birthday parties. At the parties, the children had lots of fun and presents for the birthday child. Depending on the number of guests sometimes there were 10, 15 or more gifts from the birthday child's friends.

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Kate and her husband, Carl, always had a family party where their daughter, Sara, and son, Matthew, received many beautiful gifts. They didn't see a benefit for their children to receive more gifts from their friends.

The Hohenthals knew that some of their children's friends could not attend all the birthday parties because they could not afford the gift for the birthday child. They were also aware that many community members were in need of the basic necessities in life such as having enough to eat. There are over 36 million Americans who are food insecure, which means that families are uncertain if they will have enough food for all the members in their household. The Hohenthal family created a program, which addressed each of these concerns. They called it The Birthday Club™.

When a person participates in The Birthday Club™, party guests are encouraged to bring non-perishable food instead of traditional gifts.

Kate Hohenthal, a doctoral candidate, designed a research study to see if The Birthday Club™ could increase the food donations to a local pantry. Hohenthal worked collaboratively with the Manchester Area Council of Churches (MACC) food pantry to track donations over a three-year period. During this time, tools were developed to make it easier for people to participate in The Birthday Club™ and to help define what effort would be needed for food pantries to be involved in the program.

In order to ensure that The Birthday Club™ would be sustainable over time, it was important that the program was fun and easy to use for participants, and that it did not require any additional work on behalf of the staff working in the food pantries. After determining that The Birthday Club™ did increase giving, Hohenthal, with support from her family, decided to create a website www.thebirthdayclub.net in order to make it easier for other families to participate. The website offers free resources such as for children, adults, and even the family pets! Food pantries can list their pantry on the website free of charge in order to help people become more aware of their community needs.

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> -Dale Doll, MACC director

Dale Doll, MACC Food Pantry Director said, "Our pantry has been the beneficiary of Kate's Birthday Club™ since its inception. The idea has grown locally by word of mouth and has been a boost to our food pantry. It is a great joy to see the pride on the faces of the children who collect non-perishable foods at their birthday parties and deliver the donations to the pantry. Knowing they have helped people in need is very rewarding. Giving feels good. The new website make it easy for the families and the pantry workers to participate. I hope Kate's idea spreads like wildfire now that it is out on the web!"

continued >

Look throughout our issue for more great holiday gift suggestions!

Family Music [illegible] *holiday gift idea*

Arts from the Heart, llc (home of Tolland County Music Together) is now accepting registrations for its Winter semester of music classes for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their parents and/or other caregivers. Music Together® classes will be offered at various day and evening times beginning Monday, January 4th, 2010. Interested families may go to our website at www.artsfromtheheart.net or call 860-324-8126 to schedule a free visit to December demonstration class.

According to center director Jane Roets, Music Together® classes involve both children (ages 0 – 5) and parents or other caregivers in informal singing, chanting, moving, listening, and instrument playing activities that are developmentally appropriate for very young children. We also offer a Big Kids Family Music class in Somers for children ages 5 – 7. Special introductory classes for infants under 6 months can be scheduled by request. Continuing the activities informally at home is made easier by the CD, songbook, and parent education materials included in the cost of tuition. A parent education evening is periodically offered for parents enrolled in the program.

Ms. Roets believes that an environment of informal music activities should be made available to all children, not just those who seem to be especially "musical." She observes that, because today's families tend to passively consume music through recordings and concerts rather than participate in music activities, many children are deprived of the opportunity to learn basic music skills the way they learn almost everything else: from the example of their primary caregivers. She stresses that parents do not have to be skilled musicians to provide this opportunity, and that enthusiastic participation is more important than getting the notes right.

Arts from the Heart, llc has been offering Music Together® classes in the Tolland County area for almost 10 years and currently offers classes in Tolland, Somers, Manchester and Mansfield. They also provide the Music Together Preschool Program to several area preschools. For more information about Music Together Preschool please inquire via the website, www.artsfromtheheart.net .

Founded in 1987, the research-based program, Music Together® was created for the Center for Music and Young Children (CMYC) by Mr. Ken Guilmartin and Dr. Lili Levinowitz, a national authority on music development in young children and Professor of music education at Rowan University. Classes are now offered throughout the United States and abroad.

For more information on Winter classes through Arts from the Heart, llc go to our website at www.artsfromtheheart.net or call (860) 324-8126. Enter the coupon code PP when you register and save $10 off your first registration.

In Connecticut there are approximately 300,000 people living in 122,000 households who are not sure if they are going to have enough to eat each week. Hohenthal asserted, "In 2009, this is simply not acceptable to have people hungry anywhere." There are over 3 Million people in Connecticut. Hohenthal is putting a challenge out to the residents of Connecticut. "If we can get just 10% of the people in Connecticut to host The Birthday Club™ party in 2010, that would mean about 340,000 people hosting food parties. With each party averaging about 6 bags of groceries that would be over 2,000,000 additional bags of groceries into the food pantries. This will make a big difference in combating the food shortage that occurs throughout the year. Let's make this our New Year's Resolution on December 31st."

The Birthday Club™ offers theme suggestions for parties such as a Fruit and Vegetable Party, Baby Food Party, or Breakfast Foods. The themes provide suggestions so that the parties can be tailored to suit the needs of the local food pantry and the birthday person.

A key element of The Birthday Club™ (TBC) is that all parties benefit from their involvement: the recipient of the groceries, the community for helping more of its members to be healthy, and for the host of TBC party and all the party guests. "When you host a TBC party, you just feel good," said Hohenthal.