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FALL HARVEST FESTIVAL

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Matthew and Sara greet their friend, Mia, and her mother, Deb MacLaffin, as they come to party to kick off the new Web site for The Birthday Club. Photo by Brenda Sullivan.

BIRTHDAY CLUB HELPS COMMUNITY

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'Birthday Club' is for giving, not receiving

By BRENDA SULLIVAN
ReminderNews

When Kate Hohenthal was a young girl, her mother ran the church thrift shop, and one year, just before Christmas, a man came in saying he'd lost his job and needed a suit for an interview. He found two suits, but could only pay for one, since he had many children at home. He also said his children wouldn't be receiving Christmas gifts.

Hohenthal's mother told this story to the family, and they decided to give the man the other suit. "And she told me that she wanted me to give at least one of my toys, preferably a new one, to this man's children. She would make sure that there was one new gift for each child. And that's what we did," Hohenthal said.

This lesson in lending a helping hand is behind Hohenthal's idea for The Birthday Club, which began with her own children, Sara, 10, and Matthew, 8. In 2003, she and her husband, Carl, who live in Manchester, decided to ask friends to contribute items for the local food pantry instead of bringing gifts to Sara's and Matthew's birthday parties.

The children already got lots of presents from family. "I was also aware of so much need for people in our community - people in need of the basics of life - especially food," Hohenthal said.

When her children asked if they could have a "regular" birthday party, their mother explained that birthday parties are about celebrating life.

She brought them to the pantry, where they shelve their donations and see the empty shelves fill up with food. "This was a great connection for them," Hohenthal said.

In 2006, she decided to create a Web site to help other families host this kind of party. The first step was to make sure The Birthday Club would really help. "If someone participates in The Birthday Club and donates food - but then doesn't donate their usual way, such as through their church or senior center - there is no net gain of food," she said.

So, Hohenthal - who holds an MBA in organizational behavior and is pursuing a doctorate in educational leadership at the University of Hartford - and MACC Food Pantry Director Dale Doll tracked donations over a three-year period, and found that the parties really did increase donations.



MACC Food Pantry Director Dale Doll gives Sara and Matthew each a Certificate of Participation for donations from The Birthday Club.

"I've really enjoyed working with Kate. I think it is great to get kids started on thinking of others at a young age. It's good for them and good for the community. We've had a good response, and I think we'll see even more people involved, now that she has the Web site," Doll said.

Hohenthal's Web site puts all The Birthday Club tools in one place, for free. It officially launched in August at www.thebirthdayclub.net.

The tools apply for parties where guests bring only donated food pantry items, or bring donations in addition to a gift. There are invitations, thank you notes and certificates of participation that can be downloaded.

And to keep parties from getting stale, she suggests themes.

For example, if the child's birthday is near the beginning of the school year, for example, the party could have a "Back-to-School" theme. Guests bring school supplies, or snacks such as small bags of pretzels and chips, granola bars, packaged cheese and crackers, fruit rollups, juice boxes or even lunch bags or plastic sandwich containers.

Hohenthal suggests families contact the food pantry, explain what they're doing and try to fit their theme to the pantry's needs. The Web site also gives food pantries a centralized place to register, list their needs and acknowledge donations, although it's not required.



MACC Food Pantry Director Dale Doll (left) receives some food donations from Kate Hohenthal and her children, Sara and Matthew, from a party launching a new Web site for The Birthday Club. Photos by Brenda Sullivan.

As of Nov. 21, the site had 130 unique visitors out of 241 hits and from around the world, including Germany, Great Britain, Israel, Philippines, South Africa, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Japan, Yemen, China, France, the Netherlands, Australia, Brunei and Indonesia.