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## Here Comes Santa Claus

*One hundred years from now it will not matter what kind of car you drove, what kind of house you lived in, how much you had in your bank account, or what your clothes looked like. But the world may be a little better because you were important in the life of a child.*

~ Anonymous

When Clara Kirk was at the beginning of her history making journey, I had just graduated from law school and had begun my career as an attorney. After a few years, I began to listen to that voice inside of me that was a constant reminder of where I had come from and of how fortunate I now was in my life.

In 1989, my mother attended an event where I was being recognized by an organization that I had assisted. Also in attendance were many of my friends. It was there that my mother took me aside. Rather than dwell on some award, my mom did what she did best; she reminded me of how much more I could do.

My mother reminded me that to have so many friends and

for them to be from various backgrounds was a blessing and an opportunity. The people in that room had actually come into my life, in part, because of a lesson my mother had taught me long before. It was my mother's advice to always seek friends who were older than me and also younger than me, and to be especially open to those who were from all walks of life.

So, in the midst of those diverse friends who now graced my life, my mother made the observation that it would be great if I could bring my friends together for a common purpose and do something that would be worthwhile, and would make a lasting difference for kids who were in need.

On that evening, Dreams for Kids was born.

**The Beginning of a Dream**

*The joy of brightening other's lives, bearing each other's burdens, easing other's loads, and supplanting empty hearts and lives with generous gifts, becomes for us the magic of Christmas.*

~ W.C. Jones

In one of those moments that assure you that things happen in our world as they should, when I awoke the next morning the name Dreams for Kids immediately came to my mind.

As I contacted each of my friends, who became the first Board of Directors of Dreams for Kids, there was great enthusiasm behind the idea and for the creation of the organization. The only thing missing was that we had absolutely no idea what we were going to do. What we never could have known was that the future had much more in store for us than we could have ever imagined.

One of the very first people to whom I spoke about Dreams for Kids was a friend who worked as the secretary for one of our Board members, then Sheriff of Cook County. It seems that a

woman had just been in to see the Sheriff to ask for his support for a shelter she had built in Englewood. My friend gave me a telephone number and I was soon speaking with Clara Kirk.

It did not take long to discover that Clara was no ordinary woman and that she had no time for formalities, and definitely had no patience for a long courtship. When she answered the phone, I introduced myself and I asked her if there might be some way Dreams for Kids could help the kids living in the shelter. Clara immediately answered, "If you want to know about the shelter and provide assistance, then you need to make a visit." I asked, "When would be a good time?" She answered, "Right now. If you are serious, you will come right now."

When I hung up the phone, the next call I made was to Bill Nolan, an officer with the Fraternal Order of Police. He was one of the first of my friends to agree on a moment's notice to join our Board of Directors, served as our first Vice-President. Bill said he would be right over to pick me up, and twenty minutes later we were on our way to Englewood to meet Clara Kirk.

When Clara opened the front door of Clara's House, she immediately took us on a tour of the immaculate facility and explained the guidelines and strict rules of the shelter. She said we were welcome to help in any way we could, but that we should remember that the kids who were living in this house had lost everything and what they really needed was hope.

As we drove back to our offices, Bill and I knew we had to do something for those kids. We felt an immediate connection to Clara and held a deep admiration for what she was doing in a neighborhood that was so unbelievably desolate. We could not imagine what the holidays could be like for the kids who lived in any shelter. We decided right then and there, in Bill's car, that Dreams for Kids would come to Clara's House and would bring the Christmas spirit with it.

The next day I called Clara and asked her if she would like us to host a Christmas Party for the Shelter. Without hesitation, Clara said, "What day are you going to have it?" In what became

the first of many long-standing traditions, we chose the Saturday before Christmas, which happened to fall on Christmas Eve that year.

Several days before our party, Clara called to give us the names of the fifty-four children who were currently living at the shelter. She warned, "If you are bringing gifts, you better bring extra, because we might take in more kids the night before."

Our entire Board of Directors went shopping. We made sure we had gifts for each of the kids and food for a complete Christmas dinner for everyone at Clara's House. We recruited our own Santa Claus and awoke early Saturday morning to vehicles packed with gifts and food.

### **The Tradition Begins**

*'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring-not even a mouse. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.*

~ Clement C. Moore

Prior to arriving at Clara's House, our group established another tradition and met for breakfast. My mother was in attendance as was my brother Jim, my sister Kathleen and my niece, Heather. In total, there were twenty of us that December morning in 1989. At that first breakfast, we all began to feel the spirit of the day, and as it would become apparent, the true spirit of Christmas. After we broke bread, the caravan of vehicles, with toys stacked inside from window to window, headed for Englewood.

We pulled up in front of the shelter and while the kids were still sleeping, quietly unloaded all of the food and gifts. We set up a food table and carefully arranged gifts under the shelter's tiny Christmas tree.

In 1989, my niece Heather was just an eight-month-old infant, fastened in a child carrier and resting on the couch. Twenty years later, Heather drove to the Christmas party that she has attended her entire life. The Dreams for Kids' Christmas Party is part of her life, has helped shape her character, and will, I am certain, continue to be a special part of her life far into the future. Heather has the greatest enthusiasm each year for this party. For her, this is Christmas. She knows this as tradition, as the true spirit of the season, and she would not have it any other way.

On December 24<sup>th</sup> 1989, on the first floor of Clara's House, we could hear children stirring upstairs. We could only imagine the excitement as the kids began to experience the magic of Christmas. All fifty-four kids were now scrambling to find a seat at the top of the stairs. All that childhood wonder was bottled up inside of them. *Does Santa really exist? Did Santa really come? Did Santa bring me a gift? Are there cookies?*

We quickly devised a sequence of events. Santa would arrive after the kids had come downstairs. Our recruited Santa, actually an off-duty Chicago police officer, would wait outside holding a bag of smaller gifts. This was my mother's suggestion. Englewood, however, as Clara told us, was not a place where you'd want to linger outside for too long, particularly with a bag of gifts.

Santa waited at the corner of the building, just to the side of the front windows. We hadn't figured how we would summon him at the right moment. As this was happening for the first time, it may not have occurred to us that we were creating one of many long-standing traditions.

## What If There Was No Christmas?

*Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus!  
Right down Santa Claus Lane! Bells are ringing,  
children singing; All is merry and bright.*

Inside the shelter, Clara summoned the kids downstairs, and for anyone who has had the privilege of witnessing children literally flying down the stairs on Christmas morning, imagine those kids who have awakened early on this special day in a strange bed, being sheltered from the streets. I am not sure if their little feet even touched the stairs.

As we stood surrounded by a room full of happy kids, someone asked if the kids thought Santa was coming. After bringing the excitement up a notch, we quickly realized we didn't have a plan to actually get the word to Santa. He was outside, oblivious to the hysteria inside the house.

Someone said to the kids, "I don't think Santa knows you're here. Maybe if you sing a song, he'll hear you and stop by. Why don't we all sing *Jingle Bells*?" Thus began the happiest of our traditions. Fifty-four children started singing *Jingle Bells* with all the enthusiasm and volume imaginable. With each stanza, the singing grew louder and louder. As soon as the words hit the street, Santa knew that it was time.

As Santa turned to walk from the corner of the building to the main entrance, he passed under the windows. You could only see the top of his red Santa hat from inside the shelter, but the moment couldn't have been choreographed any better. As soon as the kids saw that famous red hat moving across the house, they all rushed to the windows and piled on top of each other for a better look.

Seconds later, Santa burst through the door and let out a hearty "Ho, Ho, Ho!" In a moment frozen in time, it was Frank Capra and Norman Rockwell all wrapped up in one. As all the kids, wrapped in complete happiness and joy, mobbed Santa in

his bright red suit and bag of overflowing gifts, I realized that we had brought what Clara had asked for, the greatest gift of all—Hope.

I will always remember looking back to the side of the room. Seated in chairs against the wall were all the mothers, including my own. They were all smiling.

After Santa sat down in his chair, each child sat on his lap for as long as they wished, and on my mother's insistence, Santa gave each mother gloves and perfume. Soon after all the gifts had been opened, and the kids were busy playing with the many toys scattered on the floor, we prepared to leave so that the residents could enjoy their meal and the rest of a special day.

As we headed for the front door, Clara thanked each of us. As I gave Clara a hug, I told her the Christmas party was the least we could do and it was special for all of us as well. Clara looked me in the eye and sternly said, "You don't understand, do you? If you had not come today, they would never even have known it was Christmas."

Twenty years later, the weight of that statement still hangs heavy on my heart and brings me to the exact moment and place in that shelter. Seeing the look on my face, Clara calmly explained that without this celebration she could not have even told the kids it was Christmas. It would have been better to let the day come and go without letting them know. There was no way the shelter could afford to buy gifts, and it would have been better to not disappoint them. They had so little to look forward to on such a special morning, after waking up in a strange bed, with no home of their own.

We left with the realization that we had provided Christmas cheer and hope for children whom would have never known the difference. In the quiet of the ride home, each of us realized that this was truly the essence and spirit of Christmas. Now twenty years later, for my niece and sister, for members of our Board and for me personally, Christmas with Clara *is* Christmas. I know I could not spend it any other way.