

8

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 24th 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.

9

"Our Kids Will Talk About This For Years"

Whatever else be lost among the years, let us keep Christmas still a shining thing: Whatever doubts assail us, or what fears, let us hold close one day, remembering Its poignant meaning over the hearts of men. Let us get back our childhood faith again.

~ Grace Noll Crowell

What started as a single day of giving to those who had no home for Christmas, has grown into a tradition with a life of its own.

For many years, we continued to visit Clara's House on the Saturday before Christmas. After a couple of years, we added a new shelter to our schedule. When it became apparent there were so many kids who had so little, we created a single, huge Christmas party and hosted it at one location. Clara was sad to see the party move from her house, but understood the need to reach more kids. Since that time, she has traveled with her kids to every single party.

Our first location was Our Lady of Sorrows, the parish house of our spiritual advisor, Father Wally Brennan.

Eventually, the celebration outgrew that facility and we moved to Excalibur, an entertainment center near downtown Chicago. We held the celebration there for several more years until the need again outgrew the space.

Today, the Dreams for Kids’ Annual Christmas Party is the largest of its kind for homeless and underprivileged children in Illinois. Each year, more than 1,200 children from all over Illinois, together with their parents, teachers, and social workers enter a Winter Wonderland for a truly spectacular day of fun and Christmas spirit.

Giving and Receiving

Joy increases as you give it, and diminishes as you try to keep it for yourself. In giving it, you will accumulate a deposit of joy greater than you ever believed possible.

~ Norman Vincent Peale

Each year, we choose a facility that provides interactive games and exhibits such as those found at our 2005 host facility, the nationally acclaimed Health World Children’s Museum in Barrington, Illinois. With the generous sponsorship of Allstate Insurance Company, we arrange for transportation for children with disabilities and for those who are living in poverty.

As the kids step into a Christmas Dream, they walk past an honor guard of United States Marines, while being serenaded with carols by local church and high school choirs.

Every single child in attendance has his own name badge so that volunteers can address each child personally. Our Christmas Party would not be complete without clowns, jugglers, face-painters, and craft making, a tradition that was created twelve years ago by my sister Kathleen. The craft tables have become

our party’s prime attraction, with tables of kids, hundreds of them, concentrating hard at making that one special ornament to give to Mom. J.J. O’Connor’s mother, Blanche, and her five daughters have now joined Kathleen as craft coordinators, and volunteers clamor to get a spot at one of the tables. Blanche personally recruits a group to bake, in her kitchen, over 1,200 gingerbread cookies prior to the party!

Of course, after a full lunch, the party is topped off with that special appearance by Santa Claus. We actually have four Santas now, in separate areas of the facilities—but we don’t tell the kids. Yes, when Santa arrives, it is to the sound of more than a thousand kids singing *Jingle Bells*.

Every child now receives a shopping bag full of gifts, which are, in part, donated by the community, the U.S. Marines, and other social and civic groups. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local #134, stores all 3,000 gifts prior to the party, and hosts a wrapping party two days before the event. The fundraising events and the gift drives, of course, start months in advance. The event is so popular that volunteers wanting to participate in the actual party must sign up on a waiting list.

Understanding the popularity of the party has not been difficult. The effect the party has on the kids is evident, but not to be lost is the effect of the party on the volunteers. Many volunteers come for the first time, in much the same state of mind that we were in sixteen years ago. They are there to make a contribution and to give during the *Season*. Little did we all know just how much we would receive in return.

Dreams for Kids receives so many letters to remind us of the impact of that special day, and even more experiences will forever live in the memory of all who have been touched by this day. I could fill the pages of this book with stories that would move you to tears and others that would make you laugh with joy. In twenty years, there are so many memories and snapshots of human nature that will last a lifetime.

I will never forget watching a little boy leave the basement

of Our Lady of Sorrows Parish after Santa had left the building. This boy could not have been older than four or five-years-old, and he was dragging his shopping bag behind him with two hands; the bag nearly as tall as he was. When he got to the steps, he turned and saw me watching. He smiled and dragged the bag all the way back across the room and said to me, “This is the best gift I have ever gotten. Thank you so much for my truck. Merry Christmas.” I watched him as he left and said a prayer, being reminded, once again, of the true spirit of Christmas.

I often think of the following story from several years ago, and when I do, I am reminded, once again, that the most deeply significant moments live in us as if they occurred only moments before. One of our volunteers, a woman in her sixties, was carrying one of the crafts. I said it was nice that she had the chance to make a craft for herself. As she looked at me, I could tell she was deeply moved, and she said she had not made it. Then she told me her Christmas story.

“A precious little girl, with beautiful braids in her hair had made this craft. I saw her walking around the party holding it in the palms of her two little hands. I told her, ‘Your tree is beautiful!’ She thanked me and said she worked very hard on it and really liked it. For the rest of the party I watched her as she carried it all around with pride. A few moments ago she was leaving with her mother and had searched to find me. This beautiful girl, who had no home to return to, said to me, ‘Thank you so much for telling me that my tree was beautiful. I want you to have it.’”

Our volunteer let the tears fall as she held her tree and said, “I will never have an ornament that is more special to me. It will be the first ornament I put on my tree every year and I will treasure it.” I stood and watched as our volunteer walked out the door, holding her tree in the palms of her two hands.

We received a letter from a first-time volunteer.

Dear Dreams for Kids,

I was raised in the Uptown area of Chicago’s Northside and it was not a wonderful place. My parents never made a lot of money, but they loved and cared for my sisters and me. They sacrificed much of their lives to make our world a better place and our future a brighter opportunity. I owe much of my success in life to the example they set for me throughout their lives.

I volunteered for the Christmas Party and included my spouse, Carmel, and my two youngest children, Aaron (age 14) and Meghan (age 11). Their initial response to spending a whole day of their weekend during the holiday break was not favorable. I had to stress the importance of sharing life’s bounty with others who have much less than us.

They needed to understand how great a gap exists between the rest of the world and ourselves. They could not appreciate it until they came into contact with it, experienced it to some small degree, and began to recognize the real need for each of us, in some small way, to make the world a better place for everyone.

It was an exhausting and exciting day. My whole family lost themselves in the children and their activities. They were so busy making sure the children enjoyed themselves that they were caught by surprise when the day came to an end. My special joy was seeing how much the children responded to my children. Aaron spent the entire day with a group of young people in wheelchairs. I asked one young girl if Aaron was doing a good job and she smiled and said that he was “very handsome.” Meghan helped many children doing crafts and decorating cookies and she received so many hugs from the little ones.

When we were driving home afterwards, I asked the family how they felt about their day. Their response was wonderful. They wanted to sign up immediately for next year. Could they bring their friends? Are there any other events that help children? And then they started asking questions. Why this and why that? It was clear to me that their eyes had seen a different world where children worry more

about their next meal and warm clothing than about video games and the latest fashion.

Ms. Kirk stated that the party opened the children’s minds to a different world. Yes, that is true, especially for my children. Thanks again for allowing my family to share in this wonderful event.

*David Ferst
Allstate Insurance Company*

P.S. Is it possible to involve more young people in next year’s event? I think the children attending the event make an immediate connection with young people that enhances their experience and memories of the event.

Mr. Ferst was referring to Clara Kirk and a conversation I had with her at that 2005 Christmas Party, which I shared with our volunteers after the party to thank them for making such an impact on the lives of so many kids.

At noon, as the party swirled around us, I found a quiet corner and had the pleasure of having lunch with my friend Clara, in the cafeteria of Health World Children’s Museum, in the affluent suburb of Barrington, Illinois.

Clara looked out the window at the wide-open space and said, “Where we come from, the kids have never seen land like this. They have never even dreamed about a place like this. They wouldn’t even think it was real. It’s Disney World. Our kids don’t go to Disney World. Bringing them here and treating them this way will change their lives.”

I listened as Clara continued, “You see these kids will go back to school and talk about this day and tell all the other kids and their teachers. They will work harder in school and they will believe more in their future. You have shown them that this is all real and you have given them hope. They can believe it’s possible to live like this. *Our kids will talk about this for years...*”

Dreams for Kids’ work began in a small shelter, and each year the tradition of Christmas grew. However, Christmas is but

one day and we knew the true spirit of giving could not be a one-time event. The first Christmas at Clara’s House was the first day of the rest of Dreams for Kids’ life. We had taken our first step; it was now time to walk.