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# “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.