

Sunday, April 17, 2011

Party was fun, helped homeless children

9-year-old's birthday party turns into chance to help homeless children

By Melinda Johnston

Photo: Guests at Libby Bertelsen's birthday party. (From left); Olivia Coggins, Carrigan Grow, Dane Bertolina, Maddie Poole, Zoe Poore, Ellie Cotton, Libby Bertelsen, Sofia Dahlgren, Jackson Bertelsen, Whitney Formon, Emily Hill, Evy Oxendine and Sydney Hill. Melinda Johnston - Special to South Charlotte News

With her daughter's ninth birthday fast approaching, Jenny Bertelsen searched for a special, unique celebration.

She found it at Bright Blessings in Matthews. For Libby Bertelsen, a third grader at Covenant Day School, the organization's new "Purpose Party" was a perfect fit.

"Libby has always wanted to help others. Her friends do too. These girls have really giving hearts, they just need a place to focus," Bertelsen said.

Bright Blessings is a nonprofit organization that provides birthday parties and more for homeless babies, children and teens - a population estimated to be about 6,000 in the Charlotte region. They recently moved their headquarters to Matthews and celebrated with a grand opening celebration the weekend of April 10.

A Purpose Party, the organization's newest fund raising, public awareness idea, allows the birthday girl or boy and their guests to celebrate and help a worthy cause.

Party-goers get a brief overview of homelessness in Charlotte, tour Bright Blessing's Giving Village, participate in a hands-on service activity, and use the "Neighborhood Café" for cake and refreshments brought from home. Paper products and balloons are provided.

Instead of buying gifts for the birthday child, guests are encouraged to bring unwrapped presents to be donated to Bright Blessings. Participants learn how those presents will be distributed to their homeless peers.

Near the end of the party, participants visit "Treat Street" where they stuff a treat bag with candy and trinkets to take home.

When invitations were sent out, Bertelsen included a list of items suggested by Bright Blessings for teenage girls. The participants brought purses, beauty products, sports balls and other items that will be enjoyed by homeless teens and tweens.

After touring the facility, Libby, her 12 guests, and her 10-year-old brother, stuffed Care and Comfort bags that will be distributed to transient homeless children who don't live in a shelter but bounce between relatives, hotels, cars and camp grounds. *(Continued)*



The children made sure all the essentials were placed in the bags - toothpaste, two toothbrushes, lip balm, washcloth, soap/body wash, and hand sanitizer. Then they carefully selected a fleece blanket and a stuffed animal for each bag.

Finally, they tied each bag with a ribbon and a tag.

Completed bags were placed in boxes and set end to end so the girls could see how much they accomplished. The final tally - 38 Care and Comfort bags ready to be delivered.

They then moved to Neighborhood Café for cake and, finally, stuffed their party bags just before parents showed up to take them home. But most kids didn't leave right away. They took their parents on a tour of the Giving Village, told them about each of the areas, and then showed them the Care and Comfort bags they had completed. Several said they hoped they could hold their birthday parties there.

"I don't know what I expected, but it was way beyond anything I imagined. The girls were busy, but it was the perfect balance of being busy and having a good time. The place was so amazing and the decorations were wonderful, probably more than I would have done at my own house," Bertelsen said.

And the experience didn't end when they got in the car. Bertelsen said the guests she ferried home kept repeating the story they had just been told about the seven-year-old who got to blow out candles on a cake for the very first time at a Bright Blessings Shelter Party.



But perhaps the essence of Purpose Parties can best be summed up in the words of the nine-year old birthday girl, Libby, who said, "It was really fun."

Learn more:

Bright Blessings is at 608-A Matthews-Mint Hill Road in Matthews, across from the emergency entrance at Presbyterian Hospital.

A Purpose Party costs \$75, much of which is tax deductible. Purpose Parties aren't just for birthdays - wedding showers, baby showers, special neighborhood get-togethers, any reason to celebrate will do.

To find out more about available opportunities, or to schedule a Purpose Party, visit www.brightblessingsusa.org. You also can send email to parties@brightblessingsusa.org or call 704-846-2329.