

# Wishes Coming True

EVERY KID DESERVES A BIRTHDAY PARTY

BY DANA NEUTS

**D**o you remember the fun and excitement of birthday parties when you were a kid? Brightly colored balloons floating up to the ceiling, the laughter of your friends as they tried to hit a piñata while blind-folded, the table piled high with beautifully wrapped presents all for you? What a fun time to be a child!

Unfortunately, not all children share those happy memories. Homeless children often miss out on celebrating their birthdays, but one Eastside organization is trying to change that — Birthday Dreams. Founded by Chris Spahn in April 2009, the Renton-based nonprofit provides birthday parties for homeless children from Everett to Tacoma.

“Everyone needs to have one special day a year that’s just for them,” Spahn, the group’s executive director, says.

Currently, Birthday Dreams serves 39 homeless shelters in the area, including day, emergency and veterans’ shelters, and transitional housing. Birthday

Dreams provides monthly parties at six of the shelters — YWCA in Redmond, YWCA Passage Point in Maple Valley, Mamma’s Hands in North Bend and UGM’s Hope Place, First Place School and Mary’s Place in Seattle.

Each month, Birthday Dreams volunteers celebrate the birthdays that fall within that month, going all out to ensure that each of



the birthday kids feels special. In addition to bringing party decorations, cake, ice cream and juice, Birthday Dreams provides carnival games, including a candy walk, face painting, a craft and goodie bags for all the guests. The birthday children also get presents, selected from their wishlist. In July, for example, more than 25 children were treated to a summer birthday party at Passage Point, complete with a bouncy house and a cotton candy machine, donated by Clowns Unlimited.

For the other 33 shelters, including Hopelink, Tacoma Rescue Mission and Compass Veterans Center, Birthday Dreams volunteers provide birthdays-in-a-box. After getting a list of wants, needs and party preferences from the parents of the birthday child, Birthday Dreams assembles a box filled with all the supplies needed for a birthday party, much like the onsite parties. The primary difference is that the party is tailored specifically to one child, including his or her preferred party theme (e.g., Dora the Explorer, Batman, Hello Kitty, etc.), favorite colors and cake and ice cream flavors.

“We try to make sure each child feels like he is getting special attention,” explains Keri >>

Strong, a Birthday Dreams volunteer from Issaquah.

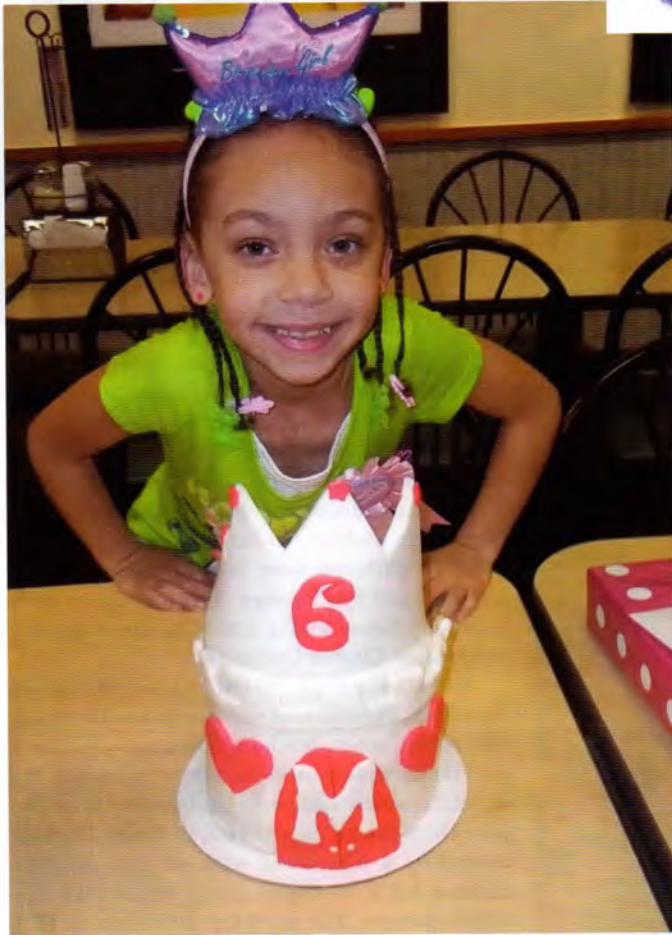
Strong began volunteering earlier this year, after returning to the area. She wanted to find an organization that could utilize her skills, but she was torn between working for a nonprofit that provided primary needs like food and shelter versus a place like Birthday Dreams. After meeting with Spahn and Shannon Avery, director of operations for Birthday Dreams, Strong knew this was where she wanted to devote her energy.

"I grew up in a home where I got to have a birthday party every year," Strong says. "I can't imagine not having one day that's all about you."

Strong believes that the birthday parties themselves are important to the children, but the mission goes beyond that. "People in the community are there to support these children, even if they're strangers. It helps shape the children as individuals, knowing that there are people to support them even in the most dire situations," she explains.

To date, the nonprofit has provided 1,426 birthdays — mostly with volunteer labor and donations from local individuals, companies like

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Starbucks, Microsoft and Expedia and service groups including New Life Church and the Renton High School Key Club. Avery, who handles day-to-day operations, has been with the organization since its inception, working full-time with only a small stipend for compensation, but she stays because she loves kids.

"I'm kind of a big kid," Avery says. "Who else gets to work in a place where we plan birthday parties all day long?"

In addition to Avery, the nonprofit receives about 80 hours of donated time per week, all paid for by other area nonprofits, including Career Path Services and United Way. Hundreds of additional volunteers help out with various tasks, including baking and delivering cakes, wrapping presents and marketing and fundraising.

"We have a good little family here, and it is always growing," Avery says.

The need for services throughout the Seattle area continues to grow too — exponentially, according to Avery, which is one of the reasons she and the volunteers work so hard to make birthdays special for homeless children. Avery says that most families find themselves in shelters because of the economy and job loss, not necessarily because they are being abused or are substance abusers.

"They are average everyday people who are struggling not to be where they are." 

PHOTOS COURTESY BIRTHDAY DREAMS

*Birthday Dreams hopes to keep up with increasing demand.*

If you'd like to learn more about Birthday Dreams or to find out how you can help, visit [birthdaydreams.org](http://birthdaydreams.org) for a list of volunteer and donation opportunities or call 425-988-3954.