

## Napa program ensures the party is on for underprivileged kids

By NATALIE HOFFMAN  
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For many, childhood's sweetest memories are of birthday parties filled with noisy laughter, with the guest of honor blowing out colorful birthday candles and celebrating with friends and family.

But for some of Napa County's neediest parents — the homeless and working poor — making memories such as these would not be possible without the help of Leadership Napa Valley's Birthday Buddies program.

Designed for children living at the Napa Valley Shelter Project and clients of Cope Family Center, the program provides selected parents with a birthday kit including invitations, balloons, a \$25 gift card, cake mix and frosting, a book and party supplies, said Michele Grupe, associate director of Cope Family Center.

Recipients are charged with organizing the party, purchasing presents with the gift card and baking their child's cake.

"We want to support the family and enable them to do as much on their own as they can to provide a birthday party for their child," said Olivia McCormick, a member of the group that launched the local program.

The Birthday Buddies program kicked off in January and is the brainchild of a practicum group in Leadership Napa Valley's Class 21, which includes McCormick, Katherine Zimmer, Michael Strong, Cyndi Kasten, Mike Manfred and Annie Madden.

Leadership Napa Valley, sponsored by the Napa Chamber of Commerce, encourages community service through leadership development. The Birthday Buddies program is the project of one of Class 21's several practicum groups.

Zimmer said McCormick adapted the program from a similar one in effect on the East Coast.

“This program has meant the world to these families. ... It really is providing great memories and opportunities for families,” said Grupe, who added that as the state faces a recession, “everyone is tightening their belts” and there is not much left over for extras like birthday parties in her clients’ tight budgets.

The son of a former Napa Valley Shelter Project parent, whose name is being withheld for privacy reasons, was one of three boys who received a Spiderman-themed party at the Napa Valley Shelter Project in late January, according to a Leadership Napa Valley press release.

“My 6-year-old son Paul has always wanted a big party for his birthday,” said the parent. “I have promised him that one day, when we have our own place, he will have one. Now, he (got) his big birthday party with lots of people to help celebrate thanks to you.”

Charlene Horton, program director of the Napa Valley Shelter Project, said the Birthday Buddies program enables parents to provide a childhood experience that is taken for granted by most.

“Shelter families have been living hand-to-mouth for some time until they became homeless. ... By the time they’re with us, they’ve been without basics for some time, much less extras. Many of these kids have not had a real birthday before, so having the balloons, cake and party celebration is something they’ve never experienced,” said Horton.

Although Leadership Napa Valley’s Class 21 graduates in June, Zimmer said, the Active 20-30 Club of Napa will take charge of the Birthday Buddies program at the Napa Valley Shelter Project this summer.

The search is still on for a local organization to administer the program at Cope Family Center after June, she said.

*Local businesses and groups can become “Birthday Buddies” by making tax-deductible monetary or in-kind donations to Leadership Napa Valley’s Birthday Buddies program. For more information, contact Michael Strong at 330-4590.*