

Salvation Army Birthday Angels

Overview: *The Birthday Angels program was created to make sure that Salvation Army shelter residents get to celebrate their birthday with a cake and presents.*

In May of 2017, having volunteered for three Christmas seasons with the Roanoke, VA, Salvation Army Christmas Angel Tree program, I asked the local captain one day, "What is done for the residents of the Salvation Army shelters in Roanoke for their birthdays?" Her honest answer was, "Nothing, really." I resolved to correct that if I could. After speaking with my daughter, we created the Birthday Angels program. For the past two and one-half years, every woman and child at The Turning Point (for those experiencing domestic violence), man at The Red Shield Lodge (for men transitioning back to work and independent living after being homeless), and young person at the New Day Center (for men and women ages 17-25 who are homeless) has had a birthday cake of their choosing, received gifts, and often had a birthday celebration.

For most of us, having a birthday with family, friends, gifts and cake is a routine so ingrained in our American experience we take it for granted, or at least take it as a natural part of life. For many of the shelter residents, a typical American birthday is truly atypical. More than one birthday "boy" or "girl" has said gratefully, "I've never, ever had a birthday before...until today." While the joy of seeing these residents celebrate a birthday, they never expected for themselves or (especially) for their children is very rewarding, the response from the birthday celebrants is often overwhelming. Tears and emotional inability to articulate thanks are regular occurrences.

We serve an ever-changing population of about 100 people. Roanoke is a small city in Southwest Virginia, and what we are doing is not changing the world, but it does bring smiles on a birthday.

We have no budget, office, overhead or staff, and no plans to change that. All we need is our dedicated Facebook group of 125 or so people. When a birthday is coming up we put out the call on Facebook, and people donate their time, talent and money. Each birthday "girl" or "boy" is asked what kind of cake she or he would like; most often they are homemade by a volunteer. The birthday individual and Shelter staff are also asked what sort of gifts are wanted or needed. Sometimes those requests are very specific, sometimes rather general, and often gift cards to places like Wal-Mart, Burger King, Subway, Chick-Fil-A, Target, etc. are part of a package that includes cake, candles, birthday napkins, a birthday card, and presents.

Finally, keep these things in mind:

1. Don't be reluctant to start something with only a dream.
 2. Don't think your idea is too small or insignificant.
 3. You don't need a building or a formal organization to make a difference.
 4. You don't need a budget, or by-laws, or employees or 501(c)3 status to make a difference.
 5. Helping a single person, or a small group of people, is as important to our world as helping 10,000 people.
 6. Service can be given in a global context, a national context, or in one's little corner of the world; the end result is intrinsically the same – making life better for someone somewhere.
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