

The Truly Incredible Birthday Party Project

Michigan Family Fun Center Operator Launches Program for Kids In Need



By Stephanie Wilburn
RePlay Contributor

A former entertainment reporter for the National Enquirer and TMZ (she was among the contributors breaking the story of Michael Jackson's death), Steph began her coin machine days as a teen working at her parent's Shakey's Pizza Parlor game room in Redlands, Calif. Theirs was among the very first Shakey's locations to add coin machines to their food and fun concept. Not only can she write, she can fix machines when they break down. Pretty cool if you ask us.

When Chris Mohrhardt first opened the doors to Incredible Mo's in January, 2013, he knew he wanted to own and operate a family fun center that would not only entertain, but also help make a difference in the lives of local kids. Yet it was a simple gift from wife Sandra that inspired him to launch The Incredible Birthday Party Project (TIBBP), a program that, for every five parties booked, provides a free birthday party to a family or child in need.

"We started off donating birthdays to causes in the community, but we wanted to do something bigger," Mohrhardt explained. "On Father's Day 2013, my wife gave me a pair of Tom's shoes, and when I read about their 'buy-a-pair-donate-a-pair policy' I thought, 'Aha!' How can we do something like that at Incredible Mo's, and potentially for the industry? We decided on five for one, or 20% of free birthdays to give back, and that was how the idea was formed."

Utilizing local charities near his Traverse City, Mich., entertainment center to help administer these parties,



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including Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Michigan, Child and Family Services of Northwestern Michigan, Michael's Place, The Caring Closet, Snowball Express and Goodwill, Mohrhardt was able to

provide celebrations for at-risk kids who might never have had a special day of their own.

"I honestly never thought about how they celebrated their birthdays, but as soon as Chris proposed this idea, I was like 'Oh my gosh, yes, yes, yes, let's do this,'" said

Cecilia Chesney, Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Michigan. Her staff works tirelessly with

Mohrhardt to help provide kids in need, mainly from single parent homes and in foster care, with incredible birthday parties.

"I think a lot about the challenges they face and the current circumstances of their situations. We are so lucky to have someone like Chris Mohrhardt in our community, helping to build our kids up. This helps put a very bright spot in their lives," she declared.

It didn't take long before Mohrhardt realized that this incredible program



Chris and Sandra Mohrhardt of Incredible Mo's and founders of The Incredible Birthday Party Project.

had legs, and almost immediately he began looking to expand and share his life-changing idea with family entertainment centers across the country. That's when Ron Hill, Chief Enrichment Officer of Redemption Plus, a prize merchandise supplier, stepped in.

"I first met Chris in November 2014, and I think within a minute of being introduced, both of us knew that we were kindred souls," shared Hill. "We realized what we wanted to do not only with this program, but also to help make the world a better place. I don't run into a lot of people that have big ambitious goals and ideas like that."

Hill had also started a not-for-profit organization called Play It Forward, in which Redemption Plus also participates, and right away he knew that TIBPP would fit in perfectly under that umbrella. They banded together to create a website that would streamline the



What it's all about: While Chris Mohrhardt had envisioned younger children would be the ones in need of help celebrating their birthdays, it was this young lady who let him see the even bigger picture. Jessica was 18 years old and had never had a birthday party — ever. "We want to create an special moment for kids like Jessica," Chris said, "which is a birthday party with a goal of letting them know that they are important, they are wanted and people care about them."

process and help family fun centers sign up to take part

in TIBPP, which also provides support and marketing

materials for business that want to participate. So far, seven different family entertainment centers have jumped on board, and they've contributed to throwing an impressive 100 birthday parties combined.

"I think people in general want to give back, but feel that they either don't know how, or that they are too busy," said Hill. "We are presenting people with a program that is really easy to administer.

They don't have to think about it. We can give them the steps, and they don't have an organization to partner with on a local level, then we can bring in charities like Big Brothers and Big Sisters on a national level."

Gina Aranki, Marketing and Public Relations Director for Child and Family Services, has also been working alongside Mohrhardt and TIBPP, and sees first-hand the incredible impact this program has had on families and children in need.

"Some of our kids have never had a birthday party before," she shared. "When your home isn't safe, when you have been abused or neglected by those who should be caring for you, having a history of who you are — celebrations of your life — these things don't always happen.

"What could be better than helping make a child who has been traumatized by life experiences feel special?" Aranki continued. "The Incredible Birthday Party Project has made a huge difference in the lives of these children. We are exceedingly grateful for the love and energy they put into making the children of our community feel valued."

The staff at Incredible Mo's has also grown to love and embrace helping out with TIBPP, and they've become so proud of the program that Mohrhardt often catches employees gushing to others about their special parties.

"It's super cool that I hear them talking about it whether we are out at an event, if it's a networking



Cecilia Chesney, the Executive Director of the Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Michigan, accepts a check for 10 birthday parties from Mohrhardt and The Incredible Birthday Party Project.

join the movement: www.tibpp.org

event, or if it's someone at the counter that walked by and I hear them telling folks about it. I think as the program has grown, so has the staff in terms of believing in the program. There is definitely a strong sense of pride that what we are doing is making a difference in the community," he shared.

While TIBPP has helped kids as young as four years old celebrate these important milestones, it was their very first party, held in July 2014, that left a lasting impression on Mohrhardt.

"When I had the program in my mind I pictured seven to 10-year-old kids in Incredible Mo's having a great time, but one of the first calls I got was for Jessica, an 18-year-old girl who had never had a birthday party in her life," he recalled. "She has been in



Gina Aranki of Child and Family Services shows her group's check for 10 birthday celebrations from Mohrhardt and TIBPP.

13 different foster homes, and nine different school systems. That was just so powerful and has provided

so much energy for me to keep going. We want to create a special moment for

kids like Jessica, which is a birthday party with a goal of letting them know that they are important, they are wanted and people care about them. That has really helped put them on the right track."

Jessica, who is currently studying social work at Northwestern Michigan college, tells *RePlay* that TIBPP is an "amazing" program which has given her the ability to see that there are kind and caring people out there.

"It meant the world to know they wanted me to have a special day," she shared. "Even if you don't know someone, you can still make their day by doing something big or even small. I am extremely thankful for everything they have done for me."

Redemption Plus' "Purpose Pow Wow" Features TIBPP



Ron Hill

Three times a year, Redemption Plus employees meet for a Purpose Pow Wow — aka a fun retreat that allows staff the opportunity to interact with their fellow Empower Rangers in order to build “clarity and alignment,” provide updates on “Big Ideas,” rally around a selected book to gain relevant insights, and recognize those who exemplify their purpose and core behaviors. The Purpose Pow Wow also provides breakout sessions to

appeal to individual interests, before concluding with good food, fun games — MEGA Jenga anyone? — and a dance party featuring a live DJ.

The most recent Pow Wow, held Oct. 1 at the historical Thompson Barn in Lenexa, KS, was broadcast on social media via a live Twitter feed and featured keynote speaker Chris Mohrhardt, who shared his inspiration for The Incredible Birthday Party Project with the entire Redemption Plus staff. The intended goal was to

help inspire employees to perform good deeds, whether it's through TIBPP or something that's meaningful to them. On Oct. 2, the company held a day-long steering committee meeting with employees working directly with Mohrhardt to discuss and help them understand the importance of TIBPP, and how to guide people or businesses that are either currently working with, or are interested in joining the program.

“This Pow Wow was very integrating. We started off talking about the fact that a year ago we were a company that sold toys, and today we are a company that can do our part to change the world,” shared Ron Hill, Chief Enrichment Officer at Redemption Plus. “My goal is to enrich the lives of everybody I come in contact with, but especially with people who work within our organization and our customers in the industry. I think it is an amazing gift to be associated with TIBPP. It wasn't until I went to Traverse City and I met with Child and Family Services, and Big Brothers Big Sisters, that I learned the impact of this program. They want to do good in the world, and help at-risk kids go on to get an education and live a life of purpose and meaning. That is the greatest thing in the world that we can do.”



Chris Mohrhardt

giving back



The incredible staff of Incredible Mo's at Jessica's birthday.

“The beauty of the program is that it doesn't require a lot of money to fund, it just needs folks to host birthday parties for them, and give them food and fun. We would love to see the industry band together on something like this, that really cuts to the heart of what we are about; having something that captures our industry as a whole, and in a real positive light.”

— Chris Mohrhardt

Chris and Jessica still stay in touch, and Ron and the crew from Redemption Plus have even helped provide her with a \$500 scholarship for school. They feel she has been instrumental in shaping what the future of the program can be. “We will definitely keep her involved,” said Mohrhardt. “There are a lot of plans to have Jessica work for us, and get the community involved. It really did make a difference in her life.”

Looking ahead, Mohrhardt hopes to see The Incredible Birthday Party Project expand to at least 100 family entertainment centers, with the core goal of putting tens of thousands of birthday parties in the hands of kids and families in need. Hill and Mohrhardt have also applied for, and are in

the process of obtaining a 501c3, so that they can take donations to provide scholarship and education programs for these deserving kids.

“The beauty of the program is that it doesn't require a lot of money to fund, it just needs folks to host birthday parties for them, and give them food and fun,” Mohrhardt concluded. “We would love to see the industry band together on something like this, that really cuts to the heart of what we are about; having something that captures our industry as a whole, and in a real positive light.”

To apply, visit www.tibpp.org, or contact inspire@tibpp.org for more information.

