



INSPIRING SIMPLE ACTS OF KINDNESS



The Incredible Birthday Party Project helps needy kids join the party.

By Robert Sax

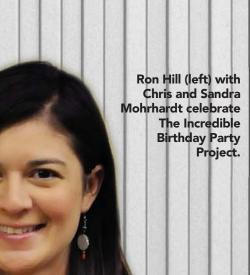
hildren's birthday parties are one of the most cherished childhood celebrations and a staple of the bowling business. "Bowling parties are the number-one destination choice for children 10 and under," says Bart Burger, director of membership and educational services for the BPAA. "There are over 10 million bowling parties held annually around the country."

Despite that impressive number, too many children don't get to have a birthday party, bowling or otherwise, due to difficult financial or family circumstances. Now, thanks to The Incredible Birthday Party Project (TIBPP), more of these children will get to enjoy their own parties with friends and family.

The project is the brainchild of Chris Mohrhardt, owner of Incredible Mo's FEC in Grawn, MI. He grew up in a bowling family in nearby Traverse City, where his father ran an FEC called Timber Lanes. Chris had planned to become an attorney, but he realized the legal profession wasn't for him. Upon graduation from the University of Michigan, Chris taught English in South Korea. When Chris came home, he worked for James Hardie Building Products for five years in product management and marketing in Connecticut and California. After a successful tenure at James Hardie Building Products, he worked for McGraw-Hill Companies for two years in business development and sales management. While working in the corporate world and gaining invaluable experience, Chris says, "All roads led back to where it all started – working every Sunday with my dad. Some people thought I was crazy for leaving a very successful corporate career, but it's stuff like TIBPP that confirms I made the right decision."

In late July of 2012, Chris seized an opportunity to start his own business and purchased Wilderness Crossing, an existing 35,000-square-foot center in the area. He renamed it Incredible Mo's, opening in February of 2013, and built it into a popular place for family entertainment.

Chris and his wife, Sandra, believe in giving to their community. For several years they have hosted Bowl for Kids' Sake, an annual event that draws nearly 500 individuals and companies to raise money for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Michigan. Through this relationship Chris learned that there are little brothers and sisters who don't get to have birthday parties, and he determined to



Civing Back Birthdays to Families in Need

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An aerial view of Incredible Mo's.

find a way to change that.

Chris figured that the people he knew at Big Brothers Big Sisters and Child and Family Services of Northwestern Michigan could match him up with children who needed a birthday party. Then Chris would sponsor the birthday parties at Incredible Mo's. It was a good start, but Chris thought there was something more he could do.

Gift Shoes Spark an Idea

The missing piece fell into place when Sandra gave Chris a birthday gift of a pair of shoes from Toms, a company that donates one pair of its shoes to a needy child for every pair it sells. Toms has donated more than 35 million pairs of shoes to children around the world.

Toms' "One for One" slogan inspired Chris to think big. "I read what was written inside the shoe and I had one of those 'aha!' moments," he says. "I thought, 'How can we do something similar in our industry and at Incredible Mo's?' and the idea just came up. What if when somebody booked a birthday party, it helped provide a birthday party for someone in need?" The Incredible Birthday Party Project was born.

As with Toms, Chris has a simple concept. He donates one party for every five booked at his center. There is no extra cost to the customer, and when someone books a party, he lets them know that they will be helping to give a party for a child in need. He promotes the project through signage at Incredible Mo's

Sandra and Chris Mohrhardt having fun at a TIBPP celebration.



and on the center's Facebook page.

The first party was held in July 2014 for a client of Child and Family Services (CFS). Jennifer (not her real name), an 18-year-old girl who had been in foster care, had never had a birthday party. "It was awesome and very emotional," recalls Chris. "Jennifer had so many people show up that we tripled the size of the party."

"When [a birthday party] was suggested, [Jennifer] was delighted but also stunned. She had this look of wonder on her face," says Gina Aranki, the marketing director of CFS. Aranki says TIBPP is a great program for "any kid who needs to be reminded that he's a kid and who needs an opportunity to laugh out loud and have fun and to not feel the weight of abuse and neglect or trauma, the kind of stuff that we see on a daily basis."

Cecilia Chesney, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters, concurs. "It's kind of a life-changer for these kids because so many of them don't ever have birthday parties. They aren't used to being celebrated," says Chesney. "It's a day that makes them really feel special. It's all about them."

Chesney recalled a nine-year-old girl who sent her a thankyou note after her birthday party that read, "Thank you so much for letting us participate in the birthday party plan. When I walked in the door it made me cry. Mr. Mohrhardt is so special and we had such a good time."

Between CFS and Big Brothers Big Sisters, the referrals keep coming. The kids are thrilled and so are their families. "We were getting these notes from parents saying heartwarming things like 'We never could have done this on our own'," says Chris. "We knew we were on to a good thing."

The response from Chris' customers has been overwhelmingly positive. "Lots of people when they book ask, 'So this helps get somebody else a party, right?'," he says. They have also donated items for the project. "One [customer] recently brought in a whole bucket of toys to give away to recipients of the The Incredible Birthday Party Project. It was really cool."

The community at large is also responding generously. The local media have done stories about the project, and corporate sponsors are signing on. Recognition has also come from the Traverse City State Bank, which gave The Incredible Birthday Party Project one of its "Caught Thriving" awards that recognize the accomplishments of local businesses and their leaders.

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The TIBPP team.

Playing It Forward

The project took another big step forward at the IAAPA Expo in November 2014, when FEC consultant George McAuliffe introduced Chris to his colleague Ron Hill, Chief Enrichment Officer of industry supplier Redemption Plus. Ron knew Chris was a customer but hadn't met him in person. They ended up talking for an hour about The Incredible Birthday Party Project.

"I thought it was absolutely the coolest thing I have ever heard," recalls Hill. He had been developing his own project, Play It 4 Wards, to develop customer interest and loyalty in new ways including social and charitable initiatives. "The whole point for Redemption Plus is doing something that's really big and really important," says Hill. "As a company, enriching lives through insights that empower is why we do what we do."

It was soon after that initial meeting that Chris and Ron decided to partner on TIBPP and make it the first initiative of Play It 4 Wards. In February 2015 they launched a pilot program to develop and test The Incredible Birthday Party Project at FECs across the country. They are currently working with the Redemption Plus marketing team as well as Fun Advisors to develop a "tool kit" of marketing materials and program tips that will make Chris' idea replicable at any center.

So far five centers are participating in the pilot program; Airway Fun Center, Bam! and Stardust Lanes in Michigan, Paradise Park in Missouri and Alley Cats/Alley Cats Putt-Putt in Texas.

Amy Richards of Stardust Lanes is working with two local charities to find



birthday recipients and hopes to hold her first party in April 2015. "Chris has done all the leg work to be able to repeat it," says Richards, "So I don't see it as a tough gig to do. I know where I have inventory, and if I can be using my inventory to do something like this, I'll do it all day long."

Jon Ellis of Paradise Park sees the project as an innovative way to promote the entertainment business as a "quality partner" in the community. Ellis regularly gives away rounds of golf and other small items for fundraisers and has a person on staff who handles 20 to 30 requests a week from charities and community groups. He sees



TIBPP as an exciting new way to augment his community work.

"We have never done anything that's focused on our birthday party," says Ellis. "This one is different because we are actually bringing them in to the facility. [We say] we want you to come in and let's make it a special memory."

Once the test programs are underway, Ron Hill says, "The next thing we'll do is start to collect data on what's working and what's not working." He and Chris will continue to refine the model, spread the word and recruit more centers to the project. Their goal is nothing less than making The Incredible Birthday Party Project a nationwide phenomenon, one joyous child at a time. *



Robert Sax is a writer and PR consultant in Los Angeles. He grew up in Toronto, Canada, the home of five-pin bowling.





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