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Around Annapolis: Birthday kits brighten life for needy children

By [DIANE M. REY](#), For The Capital

Not all kids understand the declining stock market or what a furlough really means, but one thing they do understand is birthday parties.

That's the concept behind a new kid-powered initiative of the Friends Foundation Too, an offshoot of an Annapolis-based philanthropic group.

For some children, a yearly birthday party with all the trimmings is an expected routine. But with the national economic slide hitting home, more parents are in cutback mode. When families can't afford to put a roof over their heads or are struggling just to buy groceries, birthday parties become no-can-do affairs.

The kids of Friends Foundation Too want to change that.

Eight of them got together after school one day recently to pack up "Birthday-in-a-Bag" kits to make birthdays brighter for children at the Light House shelter for the homeless on West Street and at the Annapolis Boys and Girls Clubs.

They used markers and stickers to create colorful birthday banners, then, in assembly-line fashion, they stuffed goodie bags with an assortment of small games and toys. Finally, they added invitations, party hats, noisemakers, streamers, and party plates and napkins to fill each bag to the top. A card, cake and small present for the birthday boy or girl complete the package.



Diane M. Rey - For The Capital

Kids involved with Friends Foundation Too got together recently to pack up "Birthday-in-a-Bag" kits to make birthdays brighter for children at the Light House shelter for the homeless on West Street, and the Annapolis Boys and Girls Clubs. The kits include all the supplies needed for a full-blown birthday bonanza, plus a happy birthday banner. Pictured from left are Ben Boone, 11, Chloe Boteler, 5, Luke Boone, 8, Connor McLean, 4, Nathan Selby, 7, Jake Pickens, 4, Clayton Selby, 5, and Olivia Pickens, 6.

"I think it's cool to help other people out," said Ben Boone, 11, as he took a break from coloring. "It makes you feel happy and proud."

His brother, Luke, 8, said he heard about the recession on the news. "Some people are losing their jobs," he said. "We're helping other people with what they don't have." Helping kids connect the dots between what's happening in their community and what they can do to help is the goal of Friends Foundation Too, said their mother, Traci Boone, who founded the organization.

The birthday kits aren't their first project. In November, they partnered with the Summit School in Edgewater on a charity walk that enabled them to buy hats and gloves for those in need.

Every month, the children involved with the foundation invite their friends over to help pack lunches for the Light House shelter. The first time, they made 65 lunches.

The next month, they made 100. This month, they're also holding a pajama drive for needy children at Heritage Learning Center on Forest Drive. On May 2, they'll join the Kid Walk in Annapolis to benefit local charities that serve children.

Education and empathy are important components of their projects, Traci said. The kids took a tour of the Light House facility and watched as residents gathered for a group meal. Before packing the birthday kits, they talked about how they would feel if they had no presents to open. They'll also help deliver the birthday kits to the downtown locations.

Lisa Jacobs, chief development officer for the Boys and Girls Clubs, said the staff there can't wait for the birthday kits to arrive. The plan is to include children at all three Annapolis centers, at Wiley H. Bates Heritage Park, Bywater and Admiral Oaks.

"The premise behind it is wonderful," Lisa said. "Every child should be able to enjoy a birthday. We're going to have an outstanding response."

Holly Mallonee, volunteer coordinator for the Light House shelter, was equally enthusiastic. She said on average there are 10 to 15 children at the shelter or its transitional properties at any time, and the average age of a homeless person in Maryland is 9 years old.

Start-up funding for the birthday kits will come from the Friends Foundation, which was launched in 1998 by eight Annapolis men who wanted to do something positive in memory of a mutual friend. Last year, the nonprofit organization raised more than \$74,000 for local causes. Their annual golf tournament is coming up May 21 at Queenstown Harbor Golf Links.

While the children of the founders have always helped out in one way or another with the group's activities, Traci said she realized they could benefit more by taking on projects of their own. She called the founders' wives to get Friends Foundation Too off the ground.

The women, who range in age from mid-30s to early 40s, have nearly 20 children between them, ages 3 to 14. Besides Traci, board members are Jen Selby, Lisa Mendes, Christine Boone, Brooke McLean, Ashley Boone, Ellen Boteler, Staci Foster and Heather Pickens.

Eventually, they hope their children will come up with their own ideas and lead future projects, but they saw no reason to wait to get started, said Traci, who works part time as a school guidance counselor.

Friends Foundation Too is looking for businesses to donate cakes and supplies for the birthday party kits. For more information, call Traci at 410-280-0090, e-mail fftoo@comcast.net or visit www.FriendsFoundation.com.