



Bailey Benson chose a birthday party that would benefit the Arizona Humane Society.

Gifts that give

CHILDREN'S PARTIES TAKE ON CHARITABLE DIMENSION WHEN PRESENTS, ACTIVITIES BENEFIT NON-PROFITS

BY **CONNIE MIDEY**
PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL McNAMARA**

» **FOR BAILEY BENSON'S NINTH BIRTHDAY**, everyone received a gift, even the dogs and cats who joined human party guests for part of the celebration.

No one seemed to care that the biggest gifts weren't the kind that come wrapped and beribboned. Indeed, that was the plan.

Bailey and her parents, Maria and Tyrone, chose a party to benefit — and take place at — the Arizona Humane Society shelter near Phoenix's South Mountain, an ideal setting for a girl whose career goals include becoming a veterinarian.

"Bailey's a very compassionate kid," Maria says. "We wanted to do something for her birthday that involved giving, not getting."

The Bensons, of Phoenix, were joining a small but growing number of families making lessons in philanthropy as much a part of their kids' celebrations as ice cream, balloon relays and piles of presents.

Such parties take various forms, from asking guests to raid their piggy bank for donations for a non-profit organization to working on a volunteer project as part of the party activities.

Crisis Nursery, a Valley children's shelter that posts a wish list on its Web site, sometimes receives money, diapers, baby wipes, formula and similar necessities that kids have asked their friends to bring to birthday festivities or other big occasions.

Schedules permitting, the shelter offers a tour for the birthday child when she or he drops off the gifts, marketing and communications manager Damita Curry says.

When Matthew Alire visited Crisis Nursery, he came bearing armloads of goodies, more than 120 items, such as school supplies and toys, collected at a party for his eighth birthday.

The Scottsdale boy had informed guests he'd prefer presents for the Crisis Nursery kids rather than for himself, and the positive reaction made the experience a rewarding one for the entire Alire family, mom Jami says.

Parents like Matthew's "are teaching these kids to make conscious, wonderful decisions at such a young age," Curry says. "When they do something that's hands-on and they see how they're making a difference, it stays with them longer."

The playthings and other gifts that invitees brought to Bailey's humane society party were for the animals. So was the extra TLC administered on the spot. The menu featured cookies for the kids and Popsicle-like frozen chicken broth for the four-legged partygoers.

"All the dogs loved the Popsicles," Bailey says. "Some of them ate two, but that was OK."

She and her friends also met a therapy dog there for a visit and toured the kitten rooms.

"There were little black and white kittens," says Bailey, now 10, "and you'd be walking around with a kitty attached to your jeans or your shirt. They like to pick at your shoelaces, too."

At the humane society, such activities are designed to spark empathy, an interest in community service and a commitment to ending pet overpopulation, says Kris Haley, the organization's manager of humane education.

One craft activity draws on that budding compassion, inspiring party guests to create paper frames that will adorn individual photos of the shelter's residents. The kids often add cartoon-style thought bubbles with a pet's imagined words.

"Adopters frequently tell us that the kids' artwork ... is what led to the adoption," Haley says.

THROW A CHARITY CELEBRATION

For kids with the "gimmees," a birthday, quinceañera or other party that benefits someone else may be hard to embrace. Here are steps to keep in mind if you want to throw a charity celebration they'll learn from and enjoy.

» Consider your child's age.

Preschool kids may be too young to understand why the gifts are not for them. For kids a bit older but new to the idea of charity, ease the way by making sure there are a few gifts for them, too, not just for the chosen non-profit organization.

» Hold a family discussion to clarify the child's passions.

Does she love hiking? Is he a voracious reader? Then pick a beneficiary to reflect those passions, perhaps a nature preserve or community garden that could put party guests to work for a couple of hours or a preschool in need of picture books that friends could bring to the celebration.

» Study possible beneficiaries.

Look at web-sites and make phone calls to determine the groups' needs and how your child and the guests might help. Some have guidelines for such events, and all need notice before you drop off gifts.

» If your child wants to celebrate by volunteering with friends at a charity dining hall, nursing home or other location, ask about its requirements.

Many have age restrictions or require a certain number of adults to supervise, for example.

» Share your plans in advance with the parents of guests, especially if the party involves activities at locations other than your home.

Some moms and dads may need or want to be in-

For more party ideas and a sampling of organizations that could benefit from your kids' celebrations, check with:

Birthdays Without Pressure, birthdayswithoutpressure.org (click on "Ideas for Parents").

Birthdays "R" Us, birthdaysrus.com (click on "Party Themes," then "Classic/Charity").

Arizona Humane Society, 602-997-7586, ext. 1015, azhumane.org.

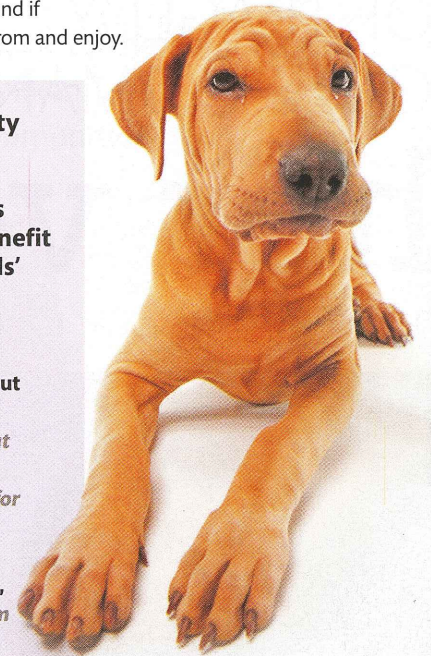
Crisis Nursery, 602-273-7363, ext. 153, crisisnurseryphx.org.

HandsOn Greater Phoenix, 602-973-2212, handsonphoenix.org.

Heifer International, heifer.org.

involved — and you might welcome their help.

» **Plan party activities that reflect the chosen beneficiary.** Heifer International, for example, suggests that kids make animal ornaments to sell, with proceeds helping the organization pay for livestock, seeds or training for



Scarlet, a Shar-Pei puppy, was found wedged in a car engine when she was 8 weeks old. She was recently adopted from the Arizona Humane Society by a Peoria family.

families suffering from hunger. Or if a shelter will benefit, guests might make hand puppets to give to homeless kids.

» **Keep guests' budgets in mind.** Suggest low-cost gifts, such as a jar of peanut butter for a food bank or a dollar-store notebook for a school. Or ask guests to bring a few coins and add them to a communal bowl.

» **If your budget allows, you might want to consider a professional service,** such as Inspired Connections (602-370-3560, inspiredconnections.net). Its Inspired Birthdays presents parties for kids ages 5 through 14 that generate awareness of non-profits. ■