

A birthday party for kids who don't know their age

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Birthday celebrations often tell a lot more about us than just our age.

We were on a three-week trip with a group of Canadian youth who were volunteering at a centre for orphaned and abandoned street children in the Klong Toey slum of Bangkok, Thailand. One day, we arrived to find the staff icing an enormous birthday cake. Curious, we asked whose birthday it was. We were surprised with the response: "It's everybody's birthday."

Let us explain.

Do you know the date of your birthday? Of course, most of us don't think twice about it. But there are millions of kids, just like the ones at this street centre in Bangkok, who don't know exactly how old they are.

UNICEF calls them "invisible." They are among the 50 million children born each year who are not registered at birth. This means they don't officially exist. Governments can easily ignore or overlook these children, especially in the hands of traffickers who sell them into slavery or the sex industry.

Many of the street children at the centre had never met their parents because they were left at the door as babies. So once a year, one lucky kid picks a day for "everybody's birthday," which they all celebrate together. We were honoured to attend this party for all the children.

It was organized by the kids themselves – kids who couldn't afford shoes of their own but shined shoes for mere pennies. They saved those pennies one by one to buy simple things, like watermelon, for their celebration.

The centre matched their contributions and provided the location for the party. It was an amazing gathering. There was dancing and singing, laughing and storytelling – a real party. We played games with the children, sang songs in both English and Thai and feasted on specialties donated by local people. Although the mountain of presents we usually find at North American parties was absent, the joy we saw in the room that day would be difficult to match anywhere.

After experiencing this particular tradition in the shantytowns of Thailand, it was difficult not to reflect on how we mark birthdays in North America.



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Birthdays are important milestones by which we measure and celebrate our life. But somewhere along the way, the celebrations have, for some, become elaborate settings for lavish gifts and competitions for hosting "the best" parties.

We've spoken to a number of party planning companies in the Toronto area who say they charge as much as \$5,000 for a child's birthday party. They offer everything from inflatable castles, spa treatments, magicians, ventriloquists and even a limousine to pick up the partygoers and return them home, loot bags jammed full. Hot dogs and hamburgers are replaced by gourmet fare.

Wallet-breaking celebrations like these can make kids associate happiness with gifts. If they receive the things they ask for, they are happy. If they don't, they are unhappy. That leads to the desire for more and more. "Did you have a good birthday?" becomes a harder question to fulfill, and we forget the true abundance that is really all around us.

What we learned in Klong Toey is that bigger doesn't necessarily mean better. One message parents can pass on to their child is to take time on a birthday to count their blessings and share their gifts with others.

For kids willing to consider an alternative to lavish parties, giving in itself can be more significant than the latest toy or video game.

Some people make donations to aid organizations in someone's honour instead of purchasing gifts – donations that help resource-poor children in the developing world. Or in honour of the birthday child, kids can bring non-perishable food items that the child can then deliver to the local food bank.

The gift of service is also powerful. Children can celebrate a birthday by gathering friends to plant trees or for a crazy fundraiser – like a pie-throwing contest—to raise money for a good cause.

Reaching out to others in ways like these leads to a cycle of abundance: It makes us feel grateful, which in turn helps us to give.

So instead of needing to receive gifts to feel good, we can lift our spirits by giving back. And of course, giving doesn't have to involve money. After all, compassion and goodwill are free.

Thinking back on that special birthday in Bangkok, one of the most precious moments for us was seeing one of our volunteers holding a young street child who was born with HIV and helping him to dance on "his birthday." In that moment, the child was neither invisible nor unloved.

The smile that this simple gift put on the little boy's face is something that money couldn't buy.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of *Free the Children* and co-authors of *Me to We*.