



Special Kids Day plans in Elmhurst

By Christine Willhite

Each December while many of us are bustling around gathering presents and gathering with friends and family, a group of volunteers is planning a holiday party for 400 children and their families.

The Special Kids Day party offers a comfortable environment for children with developmental delays or physical challenges, giving the children the chance to celebrate and visit with Santa. In other words, the event lets special kids celebrate the holidays in a very normal way.

The Special Kids Day party is one of several events the group plans each year and, if organizers get their wish, it's an idea that will catch on all over the region.

Volunteer Jennifer Rosenberg recently talked about Special Kids Day with the Daily Herald.

Q. What is the mission of Special Kids Day?

A. Our mission is to provide special events for children who are developmentally delayed or physically challenged and their families. The events are designed to enable these children to enjoy themselves in an obstacle-free environment tailored specifically to their needs. Our primary event each year is a holiday party in Elmhurst where special needs children and their families can visit with Santa, have a photo taken, enjoy homemade treats and receive a gift bag with an age- and ability-appropriate toy, all for free. We also have an Easter event and a spring carnival. Our long-term goal is to find other communities to host similar events to serve as many children as we can.

Q. How do you work toward accomplishing your goals?

A. We are a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization run by all volunteers. We partner with Elmhurst College and work with students studying special education to help plan and execute our events. We receive financial assistance through corporate and private donors, and we work with various local businesses and community groups as well. It is a team effort.

Q. Who do you serve?

A. We primarily serve the Elmhurst community and surrounding western suburbs, but it is our intention to serve as many children in the Chicago area as we possibly can.

Q. When and why did the organization start? How has it grown?

A. This event started in 1990 with a few families visiting us and has grown to serve more than 400 children at our holiday parties. It started because our founder, Rich Rosenberg, who worked in the retail business for many years, found that children with special needs were seldom seen at malls at the holidays to visit Santa and have their pictures taken. Long lines, chaotic environments and unwelcome stares were some of the reasons, and he wanted to provide an atmosphere that could allow these children to celebrate all the joys of the season.

Q. What kind of success have you had?

A. Our success has come from our ability to reach more and more children each year, and from our opportunities to expand our services beyond just a holiday event to some additional events throughout the year.

Q. What challenges do you currently face?

A. Our biggest challenges are getting the word out and finding more families, finding other communities interested in hosting an event like ours (which we are happy to mentor) and finally, having the finances to accomplish all of that.

Q. What do you wish the community at large knew?

A. Our events are free to special needs children and their families and we are run by all volunteers.

Q. How can readers get involved?

A. We are always looking for private donations, which are tax deductible, getting included in a corporate matching program, and in-kind donations for things like age- and ability-appropriate toys. We have an abundance of volunteers at this point.

- Christie Willhite

Vital statistics

Number of contacts annually: More than 400 children attend the holiday parties
Annual budget: Varies
Sources of funding: Corporate and private donors
Number of full-time employees: Zero
Number of volunteers: About 20
Donation wish list: Financial donations, age- and ability- appropriate toys

How to donate

Drop-off address: Elmhurst Camera, 535 Spring Road, Elmhurst
Mail-in address: Special Kids Day, 535 Spring Road, Elmhurst, IL 60126
Attn: Rich Rosenberg

To volunteer: (630) 530-8000 or info@specialkidsday.org
Info: (630) 530-8000 or specialkidsday.org

Special Kids Day

The annual holiday party for children with developmental delays and physical challenges draws as many as 400 children and their families. Organizers hope it helps children with special needs enjoy the spirit of the holidays in an environment designed especially for them.

When: 3:30 to 8 p.m. Dec. 3

Where: Elmhurst Art Museum, 150 Cottage Hill Ave., Elmhurst

Details: All special needs children and their families are treated to a visit and photo with Santa, special treats and gift bags

Cost: Free

Info: (630) 530-8000 or specialkidsday.org