

# Throwing a Party for Jesus

Kentucky evangelist Anne Stephens loves to win souls, but she does it with plenty of food, Christmas presents and loads of fun.

The Sunday before Christmas this year, 250 single parents, children, extended family members and the disabled will gather at Kentucky Inn in Lexington, Kentucky, for a regal party. Teens from Church of the Savior—dressed in black pants or skirts, ties, and white shirts—will serve dinner while clowns pass through the crowd. They are part of a festive celebration that features face painting, magic tricks, drama, puppetry, Christmas caroling and Bible readings.

At the end, guests will receive huge bags crammed with toys and coloring books, and a food basket for their December 25 dinner. As organizer Anne Stephens tells the audience: “At this birthday party, you take the gifts home.”

Judging by the results of previous years, about 30 children and one adult will also carry home a gift of eternal value—faith in Christ as Lord.

“This is one of the highlights of our Christmas,” says helper Kelly Hoke, a recipient of Stephens’ aid during past financial struggles. “We’d rather be here than anywhere else.”

This year marks the ninth Birthday Party for Jesus sponsored by Sonshine Ministries and Evangelistic Outreach. The ministry, which includes a mission and a weekly radio program, touches the poor, the elderly and others struggling to make ends meet.

As much as she enjoys the entire party, her favorite part is the end, jokes Stephens, 60, a blonde, 5-foot dynamo whose effusive spirit has touched thousands in this central Kentucky city during the last two decades. "It's every minute of every day for a month," she says.

"The highlight is the altar call. If no one got saved, as far as I'm concerned it would be a very unsuccessful party."

Few would accuse Stephens of being unsuccessful, though—certainly not those on the receiving end of her mission's eclectic mix of free food, furniture, assorted goods and biblical counsel. Christy Craycraft, a past participant and a hostess for this year's party, says Sonshine Ministries sends everyone out the door with love and prayer.

"She's one of the closest people I've ever seen to God," the single mother of three comments. "You can feel it coming off of her. She's sincere about her faith."

Over time, the ministry has sent 77-year-old widow Alice Baker food, an air conditioner, a TV set and a radio. Her physical ailments prevent her from attending the Christmas bash.

"I can't praise Anne enough," says Baker, who lives on a meager Social Security check. "I don't know what I would have done without Sonshine."

The ministry, founded in 1986, grew out of Stephens' personal efforts to help people from The Salvation Army, where she sang and preached each week. The thought of heading back to suburbia afterward while residents settled into bunks bothered her. So one morning she returned to shuttle a woman to job

interviews.

"I was going to do that while I was waiting on God to open the door for the ministry He had for me," says the former homemaker turned full-time minister. "I saw a need and tried to take care of it."

Relying on donated goods, the mission has operated from various locales, including a building owned by a Baptist church that served as a storage site for eight years. After that structure had to be torn down, Stephens worked from home for five years, using borrowed office space at Thanksgiving and Christmas to assemble piles of food and gifts.

About a year ago Stephens found a new location in a two-story house one mile east of downtown. However, it took her—the only paid employee—until last July to clean it up and stock the home with furniture, paintings, gospel banners and food.

Josh Hoke, 17, who helps pick up furnishings and collects donated toys each December, is considering entering the Peace Corps because of his involvement in the ministry.

"It's definitely affected my thinking," says the high school junior. "I love helping people and seeing how God comes through. In coming and helping, I'm not working for her. I'm helping the poor and needy."

Hoke isn't the only young person learning at the mission. Stephens has occasionally supervised student interns from Asbury Theological Seminary and social work students from Asbury College, both in-state schools. Stephens took several courses at Asbury Seminary but never graduated.

Despite Stephens' achievements, Sonshine Mission isn't a high-profile outreach, says Stephens' pastor, Steve Pearson. The mission once helped about 500 people a year but in recent years has served about half that many, not counting its holiday projects.

"Through her radio program a lot of people know of her," says the pastor of Church of the Savior. "But they may not know what she does. She has an incredible heart for people who are having a hard time in life."

Stephens' love has touched people with physical as well as mental and emotional problems who can't find that kind of help elsewhere, says Lexington counselor David Jaffares, who was Stephens' pastor in the mid-1980s. He remembers watching her pray for a 70-year-old at a Woman's Aglow meeting. Suddenly the woman tapped the floor and exclaimed, "My foot is healed!"

Jaffares says that because of Stephens' weekend radio program her influence extends beyond the mission. "Her selfless inclusion of [varied guests] says a lot," he remarks. "I like the program and the fact it has struck hearts across denominational barriers."

Not that Stephens is perfect. She divorced several times, once after her conversion. She also struggles with frustration at times, primarily because of a lack of finances and volunteers.

It especially bothers her when others ask Jesus into their hearts but show little evidence of their salvation in their daily lives. Since she "turned around on a dime," she wants to see others make drastic changes, too.

In Stephens' case, the transformation included an encounter with the Holy Spirit at her sister's funeral.

Two months after her conversion, her sister and nephew were murdered. Their deaths initially were believed to be suicides and were referred to as such in the remarks of the elderly pastor who filled in at the last minute.

Aghast at his harsh comments, the family dismissed him from the graveside service. Volunteering to speak, Stephens opened: "Rejoice, for they are in the arms of Jesus." She credits everything she said to the Spirit's inspiration. Her mother later said autumn winds had ceased during her talk.

Though Stephens didn't receive a spiritual prayer language for two more weeks, she knew at the funeral that God had answered her earlier prayer for the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

"I could tell what was happening, and I knew I wasn't doing it," Stephens recalls. "I had words of comfort [but] didn't know how to comfort people that way."

Comfort is still the watchword of her ministry, some 23 years after the tradition began in 1980 when she invited friends to her house and asked them to bring presents, which she donated to various charities.

After the mission started, she began giving the gifts to clients. Finally, she realized those folks would appreciate a party more than friends with overloaded holiday calendars.

"Matthew 25:40 says when you've done it to the least of them,

you've done it to Me," Stephens says. "I think that's good teaching. I think we need to keep our emphasis on Jesus being born and why He was born."

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Ken Walker has authored several books and frequently contributes to Charisma from his home in Louisville, Kentucky.

For more information about Sonshine Ministries and Evangelistic Outreach, call 859-268-0277. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.