

Simon Says Happy Birthday: A special day for 9-year-old Cashley thrown by a teenager who believes every child deserves a party

Simon Says Give raises money to throw birthday parties for children whose family can't afford it. The Worcester Chapter, run by kid president Simon Eber, hosted a birthday party for 9-year-old Cashley on Sunday.

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PAGE 1 OF 2

Wearing a black blindfold, 9-year-old Cashley Rosario spun in a circle three times, stepping dizzily toward a poster of a donkey.

Cashley stepped forward with her hands extended and was able to pin the tail just about perfectly on the rear of the donkey. Call it the luck of being the birthday girl.

With balloons, a bright purple cake made from The Queen's Cups, a painting lesson and games, this party had all the traditional markings of a great birthday party.

The basement C.C. Lowell Art Supply Store in Worcester was adorned with streamers and decorations in the colors of the rainbow as Cashley and a group of her family and friends gathered to celebrate.

Cashley's birthday was extra special with the help of 14-year-old Simon Eber.

Eber is the kid president of the Worcester chapter of Simon Says Give, a nonprofit that raises money with the goal of kids celebrating kids. Through its fundraising, Simon Says Give hosts birthday parties for children whose family cannot afford to throw one.

The organization will also prepare a "birthday in a box" -- party goodies dropped off for a family -- and raises money to give out backpacks full of school supplies.

"The idea of helping kids was something I wanted to do," Eber said. "The reason I started it is because I wanted to be the change I wanted to see."



Cashley Rosario had a hosted birthday party thrown by Simon Says Give Worcester on Sunday, March 25, 2018. Cashley, a third-grader, turned 9, and celebrated with friends and family in the basement of CC Lowell in Worcester. Simon Says Give is a Minnesota-based organization that aims to have kids celebrate kids, including birthday parties and backpack drives. Simon Eber is the kid president of the Worcester chapter of Simon Says Give.

Each hosted birthday party starts with a balloon popping game, where guests tie a balloon to one ankle and try to stomp on and pop other guests' balloons while protecting their own.

Cashley beamed as she got ready, a purple balloon secured to her right ankle.

In between the chaos of balloon popping and cake, Cashley and her guests got a painting lesson from Giselle Rivera-

Flores of The Learning Hub.

Rivera-Flores taught the group how to create their own version of Vincent van Gogh's "The Starry Night." The group munched on popcorn while using various shades of blue and green to add movement to their painting.

Simon Says Give launched in Minnesota in 2012 when then-7-year-old Mandi Simon wanted to start a way for



kids to give back. There are also chapters in Illinois and South Dakota.

Eber’s father, Jim, met Mandi Simon’s mother and brought the idea to lead a Worcester chapter to his son, coincidentally named Simon. Eber decided in 2017 that it was time to launch Simon Says Give in Worcester.

“I’ve learned that some of the things that we take for granted aren’t necessarily given to us because I was taking my birthday for granted,” Eber said. “Once a year, I get cake and celebrated and gifts from my family, but I learned that kids don’t necessarily get that experience, their families don’t have the ability to celebrate them.”

The parties cost about \$150 to put together. Though the C.C. Lowell space, The Queen’s Cups cake and lesson from The Learning Hub are donated, supplies and gifts must be purchased.

To qualify for a party, a child must be living below the poverty line. A family of four that makes less than \$50,000 would qualify.

Eber connected with Cashley through the Boys and Girls Club of Worcester.

At Cashley’s party Sunday, Eber played games with the birthday girl and

her friends and handed out slices of cake. The kids licked the purple icing off their fingers, the only time during the party that the room was quiet.

Cashley wiggled with excitement in a yellow chair as Eber put her presents down next to her. Each party comes with three gifts: A gift of need, a gift of learning and a gift of fun. Cashley received clothing, a make-your-own glow stick kit and a Barbie, respectively.

Cashley’s parents smiled through the party, taking part in the painting lesson and pin the tail on the donkey.

The best part of her party? Simply put, a shy and smiling Cashley said “all of it.”

Eber, a freshman at St. John’s High School in Shrewsbury, has raised enough money to do 12 more birthdays this year. In addition to parties and birthday in a box, Eber also puts together backpacks replete with supplies, which are worth about \$56 each.

He has received grants this month from Digital Federal Credit Union and Cornerstone Bank that triggered a matching grant from Webster Five, which will allow Eber to provide more than 300 at-need middle school students at five Worcester schools with quality backpacks

and supplies—double what he did last year.

Eber focuses on giving backpacks to middle schoolers because most programs target elementary school children. He hands the backpacks out in person and lets the children ask him questions about Simon Says Give.

“We let the students pick their backpack color. We also know middle school is a time where hormones start to come up,” he said. “It’s really important to have the stuff you like, not just the stuff given to you.”

Eber is able to pull off these parties with the help of his father.

“Simon intuitively figured out that everything he wanted to do he wanted to have a connection directly to the kids,” Jim Eber said. “I’m touched is really what it is.”

Running Simon Says Give can be a lot of work on top of high school, but Eber wouldn’t give up seeing the smile of a birthday boy or girl.

“It’s a great experience to know that you’re really making an impact,” Eber said. “I use the word special a lot when I describe it...it really warms you inside. It’s like an indescribable feeling that you just get knowing you’re doing the right thing and making someone else’s life better.” ■