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MAIN FEATURE

Spreading holiday cheer

December looks jolly with bevy of gay holiday events

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Gay Atlanta's stockings will be filled with a long list of events to get you in the holiday spirit.

The season kicks off with the Dec. 2 Atlanta Women's Holiday Ball, an annual event to benefit the Atlanta Lesbian Health Initiative and CHRIS Kids Rainbow Program. Fans of the party get their Christmas wish this year, as the event was narrowly saved from being canceled and moves from the Trolley Barn in Decatur to the Sheraton Buckhead.

"It's one of the few events we have for women," says Sibby Tansill, one of the party's organizers.

This year's event features music and entertainment by DJ World Citizen's Simone Simon and Grammy-nominated singer Nadira Shakoor.

In an effort to increase support, organizers encourage attendees to become members of the 2006 Host Committee. A \$250 contribution automatically places hosts' names into a drawing for two round-trip tickets on Delta Air Lines. Host committee members also receive two tickets to the ball, access to a VIP lounge and reserve seating.

"One of the biggest challenges we have is getting sponsors to step up," Tansill says.

The event, which celebrates its 15th year, has raised about \$200,000 for the Atlanta Lesbian Health Initiative. CHRIS Kids was added as a beneficiary this year in an effort to broaden the event's reach, Tansill says.

The wildly popular Toy Party, set for Dec. 3 at the Inforum, is an annual toy drive and fundraiser for local charities thrown by the gay-led non-profit For the Kid in All of Us. This year's beneficiaries are AID Atlanta, YouthPride, CHRIS Kids, Sheltering Arms and Hillside.

"There's something really special here," says Alex Wan, president of For the Kid in All of Us.

The event started about four years ago as a Christmas party at Wan's home, where he and his roommate asked friends to bring toys. It has collected more than 8,000 toys and gift cards, as well as about \$173,000 since 2003, Wan says.

"It's been growing every year," he adds.

Donated toys or gift cards must be worth at least \$10, but Wan says for some people, money is no object.

"We've seen people come in with mountain bikes and some with bags full of toys," he says. "It's just a big sand box."

After the event, toys and funds are distributed among the beneficiaries.

Wan says for some people, donating toys bring back memories of childhood. It allows them to relive happier times, or bring joy to children.

"This is something that everyone can relate to and identify with," he says. "There's a story with every toy."

Wan remembers the holidays he and his sister shared while growing up, and wants every child to have that same experience.

"We never really wanted for anything," he says. "I want every kid in Georgia to experience that."

Kathy ColbeNson, chief executive officer with CHRIS Kids, says her organization is grateful to receive funding from both Toy Party and the Women's Holiday Ball. She says her non-profit organization, which was created in 1981, must raise around \$2 million each year to fund programs, including the CHRIS Rainbow Home for homeless gay youth.

The Rainbow Program provides a safe and supportive environment with life skills training, job training, medical services and legal services to the youth. They are also provided sleeping quarters. Colbenson says many of the youth are thrown out of their homes because of their sexual orientation.

"We couldn't do what we do without the help of the community," Colbenson says. "So we think events like the Toy Party and Atlanta Women's Holiday Ball help a lot.

"We're saving and transforming lives," she adds. "I have kids now that come back and tell me how they're doing."



Organizers of **Toy Party** gather round a pile of goodies at a previous event. Every year so far, the group has raised more funds and toys than the previous holiday season's party