

Good Works: Holiday happening helps needy kids

By [Christopher Quinn](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 12/01/07

Alex Wan's annual holiday house party has turned into a chummy get-together of, oh, 4,000 or so and into a windfall for just as many poor, homeless, abused or sick kids.

The party that started as a way to gather a few new toys for kids — he asked original attendees at his Morningside home to each bring a new plaything to give away — has snowballed into an event that packs people into a downtown conference venue and has its own organizing nonprofit corporation.

The exponential growth was not unwanted, but its speed surprised Wan and the other volunteers. They never dreamed that what began as an off-the-cuff idea would grow into a big deal with sponsors such as Delta Air Lines and a need to provision a party for thousands.

"When you talk about 4,000 people, it's pretty awesome in just the cups you have to buy," Wan said. "You start multiplying it out, and it's pretty scary."

But worth the fright.

"The best thing about it is that you see what you have done at the end of the night. You see this mountain of toys in the middle of the room," he said.

Wan and other party organizers then hit the road like cheery elves, dropping off the toys at charitable agencies across metro Atlanta and meeting the children who are recipients.

The [success](#) makes it obvious that they have tapped into something that many metro Atlantans feel strongly about, he said.

That became apparent after the first toy party in 2002, said Rob Borden, who now lives in Seattle but was Wan's roommate and party co-sponsor. That year, for their annual Christmas party, they asked friends to bring a new toy. They told friends to invite their friends as well. They had no idea what kind of response they would get.

Guests arrived with one, two or more toys. Not cheap toys, nice toys. The toys piled up around their tree. Guests continued arriving.

The bearers of gifts would say, This is a toy I always wanted as a child. Or, I got a toy just like this and loved it. It was my favorite.

Darell Gingrich, who was at the first party and continues to help organize them, said shopping for toys is gratifying on many levels.

"That's the cool part. Going to Target and looking at all the toys and figuring out what you are going to buy," he said.

One year he bought and assembled a little red wagon, a classic Christmas gift that he had as a child. Another year, he bought a skateboard, another gift he had received.

The givers get so excited about the toys they bring, the group decided to name the nonprofit they formed For the Kid in All of Us.

"We had about 200 or so toys" after the first party, Borden said. "We were blown away."

Wan said, "Afterward, we were kind of cleaning up and said, 'We have hit on something here.' People really respond when you talk about children in need."

Borden works in marketing, and Wan, an engineer, had volunteered at other charities, so they put their collective skills together, drafted 17 friends and decided to try it again in a rented facility. They hoped for 750 people to show up in 2003.

They got about 1,200. The annual event has continued growing and outgrowing venues. This year, the party will be at the Atlanta Apparel Mart downtown.

Borden, who is flying back for the party, said it attracted strong participation from Atlanta's gay community.

"A lot of us do not have kids," Borden said. "So getting involved in the holiday season and giving toys to kids is something a lot of gay and lesbian individuals really enjoyed."

"I think a lot of fund-raisers or events or involvements that we are involved in often support gay and lesbian causes, whereas this is a larger Atlanta community event and demonstrates the fact that gays and lesbians are giving back to the larger community."

He is waiting to hit the ground in Atlanta before buying his toy, he said.

Buying is fun, Gingrich said. The cocktail party is great. There is only one thing better.

"The best part is going to the beneficiaries and meeting the kids and seeing who is going to get [the toys]," Gingrich said. "You get to see the end, the impact it has."

HOW TO SUBMIT ITEMS

Send items and photos for this column to Good Works, 72 Marietta St. N.W., Atlanta, GA 30303, or e-mail us at goodworks@ajc.com. All items must be submitted in writing. Please include date of event and a daytime phone number for a contact person.

THE TOY PARTY 2007

5:30 to 9 p.m. Sunday at Atlanta Apparel Mart, 250 Spring St., Atlanta. Open to public; cost of entrance is a toy or gift card worth \$15 or more. Complimentary cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. Information: www.forthekid.org/toyparty2007_home.html.