

Knoxville News Sentinel

Rhymes and Reasons

Birthday's are better when great-nephews are around

By Sherri Gardner Howell

I guess I have to face the fact that I can sometimes be a real wet blanket. That is especially true when it comes to birthday parties.

Friends are always amazed by my reaction to plans for my birthday. My feelings about birthday parties – if I am the guest of honor – are inconsistent with how I feel about parties in general. I love crowds, can't wait to attend events, like to work a room, talk to everyone and just generally will take an "outing" over a night at home any day of the week.

But put the words "your birthday" before the party, and I'm an unwilling participant.

Don't get me wrong. I have had some great birthday parties in the past. My 7th birthday party as a child is still vivid in my memory even though the black-and-white photographs of the event are faded. It was my first birthday without my father, my first party in Lexington, Tn., and my first party with new friends. I had finished my first school year in the town where I would live until I was 18, so it was an important day for me. Everyone showed up, and the party was a success.

For my 16th birthday, my mother actually pulled off a surprise party. I don't think she really intended to do it, although she never did admit that. My boyfriend and I had a big fight two days before my birthday and broke up, so I was in the pits of doldrums. The hardest part of the party was getting me out of my jeans and into a skirt before the guests arrived. I think Mom convinced me we were going to Shoney's in Jackson to eat. No self-respecting young lady would wear jeans to Shoney's, no matter how depressed she was, so I finally changed clothes. It was a great party, and Mother even let us eat in the living room.

There have been others, but, with apologies to everyone who has done special things for me over the years on my birthday, this year's birthday was "the best birthday EVER," and I planned it myself.

The theme: Aunt Sherri's Opposites Birthday Party.

The guest list: My best friend, Michelle, and three of my great-nephews, ages 4, 6 and 9.

The venue: Treetop Family Adventure in Birmingham

Here's what happened: Michelle and I were going to Orange Beach the day after my birthday for a get-away week. Our friend Mary joined us, but couldn't come until Tuesday. My husband was

out-of-town on my birthday for an annual golf trip. I decided that what I really wanted to do on my birthday was see the Alabama great-nephews, especially since we were driving right through Birmingham on the way to the beach.

So, after checking with their parents and grandparents (who were babysitting since the parents were out-of-town), I sent the boys an invitation to Aunt Sherri's Opposites Birthday Party. The idea was everything was to be the opposite of what you would traditionally think of for a 50-something birthday party. Instead of a fancy restaurant, we would go to Treetop Family Adventure, which is kind of like a Chuck E. Cheese on steroids.

Instead of steak and lobster, we would have pizza and popcorn.

Instead of Margaritas, we would have chocolate milk.

Instead of presents for me, I would buy presents for them (they particularly liked that one!).

Michelle and I picked up the boys and headed to Treetop at about 5:30. We got back to their house for birthday cake and ice cream at 9 p.m. The hours in-between are a blur of video games, Lazer Tag, miniature golf, bouncy houses, bowling, water balloon fights, pizza, popcorn, candy and 20 minutes at the prize counter with 250 tickets to redeem. I truly had forgotten the seriousness of choosing between a blow-up hammer and a plastic Slinky.

Michelle bought an ice cream cake and the coolest birthday candle I have ever seen. When you light it, it shoots like a sparkler, opens into a flower and plays "Happy Birthday." The boys and I were totally impressed, even though she did have to disassemble it to make the music stop. They loved their presents – the result of Aunt Sherri spending two hours at Toys R Us the weekend before. And, since their parents were out-of-town, we stayed up until almost midnight playing Go Fish, War, a couple of board games and finished three pages in the Star Wars Sticker Book.

And we talked and talked and talked. We lamented the fact that Aidan, my Atlanta great-nephew who is also 4, was not with us. They told me about school and baseball and T-ball. They told me about the upcoming talent show where they were honoring their friend Drake, who died in an accident in November. They wanted to know about the new Avengers movie, which I had seen, and I told them everything so nothing in it would scare them. Camden dressed up in his Hulk costume, and we read a book about a dancing giraffe.



From the minute we arrived until they were fast asleep, there was always a tiny hand holding mine or a lap full of boys.

Birthday celebrations and birthday wishes can take many forms. I hope I have many more birthday parties of all kinds, but the bar has been set pretty high. Aunt Sherri's Opposites Birthday Party was the best birthday party EVER.