Dan Shufelt, president and CEO of Arizona Helping Hands, provides such items as birthday kits, beds, cribs and clothes to foster-care families from their warehouse in Scottsdale.

ARIZONA HELPING HANDS: BIRTHDAY DREAMS PROGRAM

Celebration lets children know that they are loved and cared for by community

The importance of a birthday can not be overstated for kids who have had a difficult beginning. Arizona Helping Hands provides personalized birthday packages to children in foster care, most of whom have experienced abuse and neglect in their short lives, and many of whom have never celebrated a birthday. One child we were introduced to didn’t even know the words to the Happy Birthday song.

Birthdays are one day to truly celebrate, to cast cares to the wind and have a day filled with happiness. I’ve held parties for my own children that were just a day of fun — a party surrounded by friends and family. Watching a youngster blow out the party candles is an image etched in so many beautiful memories.

Unfortunately, too many kids don’t have these experiences. Children who have been the victims of actions by stupid adults can’t even enjoy a day of celebration. At Arizona Helping Hands, we have set out to change this.

Our Birthday Dreams program was established to let children in foster care know that they are loved by our community. Requests are received daily to prepare a personalized birthday gift for little Jose or Suzie. Volunteers sift through our inventory of toys, games and more to find the perfect toy for 4-year old Sammy who likes trains. Wrapping the selections up in beautiful paper and placing the items inside a hand-decorated paper bag completes the package that will let another child know that someone cares about her. This program provided happiness to 1,782 children in 2017.

Laura was born in the US to a Mexican national. Shortly after birth, Laura’s biological mom dropped her off at an orphanage in Mexico. Upon turning 13, the nuns at the orphanage gave Laura the option to accept a placement with a US foster home. Hearing that the US is paved in gold, Laura (who did not speak a word of English) said YES. From age 13 to 18, Laura was bounced around to five different foster homes. A difficult life, and unfortunately Laura is not unique. Laura shared with us that her special day had never even been recognized until her social worker and therapist kicked in to buy her a cake for her 16th birthday. She cried when I told her how many kids were assisted by our work.

We don’t want there to be any more Laura’s. We want children to know that they are not defined by the horrible things that have been done to them. Every child is special and deserves to be celebrated.

Love, safety, comfort and a bit of happiness. This is what we at Arizona Helping Hands seek to spread every day for the 15,000+ kids in foster care in Arizona.