

## 2007 -2008 The Birth of Katie Claus

It was Friday, December 14, 2007, and my daughter Katie (then six years of age) and I were walking the holiday aisles of WalMart when I became aware that Katie had stopped some distance behind. As I made my way back to her, I noticed that she was holding a small Teddy Bear – one of the “Care Bear” series. “Find something that you like?” I asked. “Daddy”, she began, “I was walking by, and I noticed these toys, and I got this idea in my head – ‘If I could give one of these [toys] to all the sick children, they’d feel better and they could have a happy Christmas’”. “That’s a big thought,” I replied. “Maybe a little bit too big. Let’s talk about it some more when we get home.” She agreed, and that was that, or at least I thought it was.

Later that evening, Katie discussed her idea with her mother, Elizabeth. She was very supportive of the idea, but she carefully pointed out to Katie that it would be up to her to raise the money. She also cautioned Katie that world-wide was probably not the best place to start. Together Elizabeth and I convinced Katie that it might be better to start with kids close at hand and give the idea an opportunity to grow. Elizabeth suggested starting with the kids at the Levine Children’s Hospital [part of Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, NC] who couldn’t go home for the holidays, and after brief discussion Katie and I agreed. The hospital staff lets as many children go home for the holidays as possible, but even so, there are always many who can’t go home. Those children, the ones too sick to travel, many from out of town or out of state, perhaps from families whose economic resources have been exhausted, and some who might never leave the hospital alive, those children – the ones left behind – would be Katie’s target group.

In three days, Katie raised \$162 (including money she’d been saving for almost a year to buy a puppy), and on Wednesday, December 19<sup>th</sup>, we all went to the hospital where she presented Ms. Deana Williams, the Coordinator of Volunteer Services, two huge Santa bags filled with presents – an event Katie described later as “the best time of my life.”

From my notes of Katie’s project, I wrote a story that I called “Led by a Child”, which was published in “The County Edge” (Union County –Monroe, NC), on December 28<sup>th</sup>. This resulted in a flurry of phone calls and e-mails from people congratulating Katie for her accomplishment, many expressing their desire to contribute if she should decide to do it again in 2008. We kept all of these contacts, and others we had recently developed, against the possibility that she might really want to do it again, but being familiar with the attention span of a six-year-old, we estimated the chances of that happening at not better than 50:50. But Katie is a special kid, and it didn’t take her very long to convince us that 2007 was only a beginning.

On Valentine's Day 2008, Katie received several cards containing money – all of which she stuffed in a jar for “her kids”. Then on her birthday in July it was the same thing. In fact, it was the same thing all year – whenever Katie got money, into the jar it went. Elizabeth and I caught the habit and began to drop in our pocket change, maybe a dollar bill now and then, and the idea stayed alive. But if there were to be presents for Katie's kids in 2008, there were two things we had to do: get the word out to everyone who might want to make a contribution, and make it easy for everyone to get their contribution back to us. We opened a savings account for Katie and set her up a web page under the name of [KatiesKidz.org](http://KatiesKidz.org), We also secured the e-mail address of [KatiesKidz@gmail.com](mailto:KatiesKidz@gmail.com), and with those key items in place, we were ready to begin the process of getting the word out.

Katie wrote a letter introducing herself, telling her story, and asking for contributions, and on November 2nd, we sent it out, in her own hand, to some 130 contacts. And as hits began to register on her website, the money began to come in, and Katie responded to each contributor with a personal thank-you note. Then, after considerable discussion, Elizabeth and Katie set the project goal at \$2008, and I swallowed hard. I'd hoped she'd go for something like \$1000 (maybe \$1200), but not Katie. She had no doubt of making her goal. In fact, she went a step further and added that she hoped to buy an i-Pod or two for the older children. Of course Katie had no idea what an i-Pod costs.

After Thanksgiving we sent out a follow-up e-mail advising people of the goal and her progress and thanking those who'd already contributed, and over the next several days, contributions continued to come in – slowly but steady. Then on December 9<sup>th</sup>, on the way to school, Katie decided that she wanted to call New Life 91.9 FM, and tell Gary Morland about her kids. This event proved to be a milestone, and [KatiesKidz](http://KatiesKidz.org) shifted gears. Mr. Morland edited his conversation with Katie into a very nice two-minute interview, which he then aired several times during the next couple of days. Hits on the website spiked and contributions followed accordingly, this time coming mostly from people we didn't know. And they came with stories of their own – many of them heart-warming or gut-wrenching. Like the married couple from Marshville, NC, who met when they were kids at Camp Care, a summer camp for cancer patients. They retold Katie's story on their own website and added a button to take people to Katie's. And a gentleman from Matthews, who'd lost a teenage son to brain cancer, sent Katie a check for \$200 and offered to help her with future fund-raising. Katie's story was touching people's hearts.

I called “The County Edge” and told the associate editor some of Katie’s story, reminded her of the “Led by a Child” story they had published the previous year, and asked if they’d be interested in doing an article. The owner of the paper came to our house and talked with Katie for almost an hour – a conversation which resulted in a front page feature with two large, full-color pictures in their December 12<sup>th</sup> issue. Contributions topped \$1000, and I began to believe, for the first time, that Katie might reach her goal. Elizabeth contacted WIXE 1190 AM in Monroe, NC, and told them about Katie’s story on the front page of “The County Edge”, and their scheduler asked to have Katie on their “Talk of the Town” news program with Shane Greene on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>.

That Wednesday was a golden day. Katie, in the fullness of her seven years and only some \$500 from her goal, was all smiles and confidence, and Mr. Greene and his boss, Mr. Morgan, were visibly impressed. The three of them talked for approximately ten minutes, and Katie spoke out clearly, mentioned her website several times, and was totally charming in the special way that only a very young girl can be. Mr. Greene could barely wait until the end of the interview to make a contribution, and there were others – like the anonymous gentleman who walked into our bank’s Monroe branch, said only that he wanted to help Katie’s Kids, and left \$100. That day went on to become the biggest fundraising day of the project, as Katie brought in over \$700 and sailed past her goal with a full week left to go before Christmas.

We spent every spare minute during the week of the 15<sup>th</sup> leafing through sales flyers, checking store hours, and taking Katie to meet store managers. She told them about her kids, handed them a copy of “The County Edge” with her front-page feature, and then asked them for a discount on behalf of her kids. The response was excellent. The manager of a crafts and hobbies store promised her a 30% discount – even on goods that were already on sale. The manager of a department store walked to the service desk and returned with a \$50 gift card which he handed to Katie. And the manager of a restaurant where she intended to buy gift cards promised her ten complimentary meal cards having a value of approximately \$100. Everyone seemed to be happy to help.

The shopping itself began on Friday, the 19<sup>th</sup>, with a trip to the Apple Store. Earlier it had been Katie’s goal to buy one or two i-Pods, but when she walked into the store that afternoon, having raised over \$2600, it was her intention to buy eight. However, while she was making her purchase, the store manager, who had been deeply touched by Katie’s story, came out and gave her two additional ones free. We continued the shopping on Saturday with a trip to Michael’s where Katie bought eight buggies-full of art and craft supplies, books, and toys. Then from Michael’s we traveled to WalMart for gift cards and an armload of personal CD players, and on to Target for several dozen card and board games, which we loaded into an already packed Honda Odyssey during a thunderstorm. The final stop of the day was at Blockbuster for more gift cards, and then home – at bedtime, dog-tired, soaking wet, but feeling wonderful.

We spent most of Sunday sorting, labeling, and repacking well over **600** individual gifts into twenty-four cardboard shipping containers and three large Santa bags for delivery to the hospital the following day. Then, on the way to Levine, we made one final stop – at Chick-fil-A – for another fifty gift cards and a stack of those crazy calendars with the cows on them.

Our arrival at the hospital was something of a circus. Although we had warned Ms. Deana of the number of cartons we were bringing, we (and they) quickly found that hearing is one thing, but seeing can be something very different. There weren't nearly enough buggies to hold everything, so much of our load was carted into the lobby in wheelchairs. And there were people everywhere – patients and staff coming and going and Ms. Deana and her people of course, but also one of the hospital's community relations specialists, a reporter and a photographer from "The Charlotte Observer", and eight or ten Child Life Specialists – all there to meet Katie. Everyone was asking questions, snapping pictures, opening boxes, shaking hands, and hugging Katie at the same time. The confusion bordered on chaos, but the joy overflowed – the joy of needs being met and dreams coming true. And Katie, in her red sweater and Santa cap, was magnificent. She'd worked and saved toward this moment for a full year, and she didn't miss a second of it.

We wouldn't be there on Christmas Morning, of course. Katie wouldn't see the five year old boy with leukemia awoken to learn that Santa can even find you in the hospital. She would never know the seventeen year old girl with no hair who would find an i-Pod and an i-Tunes card by her bed. Those treats were for others. Katie's reward was in simply knowing that she had done the best she could for her kids.

As for me, I thought the surprises were over when I finally sat down on Christmas Eve to rest for a moment and read the "Katie Claus" article in "The Charlotte Observer". I had no idea there were still several hundred more dollars to come in. And the biggest surprise of all – right there in black and white – something Katie had told Mr. Morrill that she hadn't told Elizabeth or me: "Next year we're going to do two hospitals."