

### It's Party Time

Holiday event to delights 500 annually

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From little acorns grow towering oak trees, so the saying goes. When Amy Sacks Zeide was 12 years old she saw a television news report that changed her life. Toys meant to be distributed as gifts to children at a homeless shelter were stolen the day before a winter holiday party.



Amy Sacks Zeide

"I couldn't imagine how someone could take toys from a shelter," said Zeide, now a 27-year-old wife, mother, Davis Academy special education teacher and religious school principal at Congregation B'nai Torah.

She dipped into her allowance and asked friends to donate to the cause, and the next day she took the funds to the shelter so new toys could be purchased.

Looking forward, said Zeide, "I decided to make sure that didn't happen next year." Her bat mitzvah was the following October, "a good time to plan a holiday party," she said. "I knew that I would get money for my bat mitzvah."

With a \$400 budget and the help of her parents, Harvey and Jacquie Sacks, Zeide contacted Jewish Family & Career Services, bought toys, arts and crafts supplies and food, and threw a party for 25 children at Genesis Shelter.

"Individual shelters did parties if they could," said Zeide. "We saw that no one else was doing it on a wider scale to reach all of Atlanta."

That's when Amy began organizing the annual Amy's Holiday Party for homeless and foster care children, now in its 15th year. Five hundred children

are expected to attend this year's party on Dec. 6, at the Holiday Inn Capitol Conference Center. Three hundred-plus teens have volunteered to help.

"Because of the community rallying behind me to support this project, it grew to what it is today," Zeide said.

By the time Zeide left for college in St. Louis, the party was an established community-wide event that she didn't want to see come to an end. She turned over the day-to-day planning to Ahavath Achim Synagogue's USY youth group. Zeide served as an advisor from afar, returning for the party that was held at Ahavath Achim. Eventually, the party fell under the administration of a succession of Jewish communal agencies working with teens, who made up the party's volunteer corps. In 2008, The Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta's Teen Community Service department brought the party under its supervision.

Zeide still plays an important role in her namesake project, and she said the party has played an important part in her life.

"What I've learned from it is a part of who I am. It's affected other choices (I've made) and how I view the world," Zeide said.

She said she learned leadership skills and about the importance of having a voice and giving back to the community. As an adult, she advises teens who have those same goals.

Zeide said the most important thing she tries to do for Amy's Holiday Party is "make sure everyone has an opportunity to participate and to join with me as a volunteer or donor."



A child hugs a new stuffed bear he received at Amy's Holiday Party in 2008.

To volunteer or make a donation to Amy's Holiday Party, go to [www.atlantajcc.org/tes](http://www.atlantajcc.org/tes) or call (678) 812-3978. Follow on Twitter @jewishteensatl and be a Facebook fan: Jewish Teens in Atlanta.

### Adult Committee Supports Teen Party Planners

Amy's Holiday Party, the annual event for homeless and foster care children started by Amy Sacks Zeide when she was a teenager, came under the supervision of the Marcus Jewish Community Center teen community service department in 2008. Throughout the 15-year history of the party, metro Atlanta Jewish teens have volunteered to help organize the event and play host to the hundreds of children who attend each year.

Robbie Medwed, the MJCC's teen community outreach and education director, oversees the teen and adult committees. Beginning each year in February, the groups work together to plan Amy's Holiday Party. This year's party will be on Sun., Dec. 6, at the Holiday Inn Capitol Conference Center.

Medwed said many members of the adult committee, chaired for the

second year by Jessica Plasker, volunteered for Amy's Party as teenagers, and some others are Atlanta newcomers who were looking for a volunteer opportunity.

Plasker, 25, was a ninth-grader when she volunteered to help with Amy's Party. Throughout high school and college she helped raise funds to support the event. She served as co-chair of the 2008 party.

Plasker and her adult committee work on behind-the-scenes organization, such as fundraising, transportation of volunteers to the party venue and contacting homeless shelters, so the teens can concentrate on party planning.

"I'm very proud of how much the party has grown," said Plasker, a first-grade teacher. "It's been able to put a smile on so many kids' faces from year to year."

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### Teen Triad Co-chairs 2009 Amy's Holiday Party

When Amy Sacks Zeide started Amy's Holiday Party for homeless and foster care children, her goal was to bring some cheer into the lives of disadvantaged youngsters.

An unexpected benefit has been the building of an organizational structure that fosters leadership development for metro Atlanta Jewish teens who volunteer to help plan and host the party each year.

This year, three hundred teens are expected to volunteer at the Dec. 6 event at the Holiday Inn Capitol Conference Center.

Stefanie Adler, Sydney Cohen and Alex Gelernter are co-chairs of the 2009 Amy's Party teen committee. All three volunteered for the holiday party for at least the four previous years.

Stefanie, 16, was a party-day volunteer for two years before becoming a teen committee member in eighth grade. She was inspired by a speech she heard Zeide deliver about the party.

"It's our responsibility to help. When we help non-Jewish people, it shows the way we view the world as Jews," said Stefanie, a Riverwood

High School junior and the daughter of Jason and Donna Adler of Sandy Springs.

She said she derives satisfaction from knowing she is helping children have "one of the best times they'll probably have all year." Volunteering has also helped her learn "how a community works," she added.

Sydney, an 18-year-old North Springs High School senior, volunteered to be on the planning committee after her first year as a party-day volunteer. She said she likes working with children and helping with a Jewish event is a "great way to stay involved with the Jewish community."

"(Helping with the party) teaches a lot about leadership and responsibility and how to deal with people in the community," added Sydney, the daughter of Dan and Heidi Cohen of Sandy Springs.

Being around children who have so little and giving them a day to help them feel better impacted Alex when he first volunteered for Amy's Party five years ago. He asked to be on the committee, and then asked to be a co-chair.

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Amy Sacks

**Toy Story**

by Esther D. Kustanowitz

**E**VERY WINTER, AN ATLANTA DOCTOR TOOK HIS young son and daughter to the toy store. Using their piggy bank money, the kids bought as many toys as funds would allow and drove them to the local hospital, to deliver to children who'd be spending their holidays under less than ideal circumstances.

When Amy Sacks, the doctor's daughter, was 12, she learned that a local shelter had collected toys for homeless children, but that the toys had been stolen. So Amy designated \$400 of her bat mitzvah money to the creation of Amy's Holiday Party, a party for 25 local children who were either homeless or in foster care, giving them the Christmas/Chanukah that they otherwise wouldn't have had.

Twelve years later, thanks to involvement from the Center for Jewish Education and Experiences and Jewish Family & Career Services' Project Connect, Amy's Holiday Party has become a force for changing the lives of local kids. On the participant level, the program brings holiday joy to the less fortunate members of the community, and local teens act as the planning committee, developing and executing fundraising projects, assisting with recruiting and marketing, selecting activities, shopping for toys and serving as on-site leaders at the event.

Amy, now 24, is a newlywed, having recently married Oracle software developer Aaron Zeide. Amy's Holiday Party continues to thrive — mobilizing more than 300 teenage volunteers and benefiting 500 local children — a growth for which its eponymous founder is extremely proud. "At this point I almost take no credit for it because of where it's gone. It's the kids who make the party possible; it's the community's teen program now."

Having grown considerably since its inception, the program now has some adult administrative supervision, but the point, its founder reiterates, has always been to get young people involved. "The party gives teens the opportunity to see how their efforts can pay off. It shows them that their efforts make a difference. They're not just writing a check. They have the opportunity to work together, and at the party, they see the smiles on the kids' faces. It impacts their thinking about themselves and their place in the community."

And just because the program is based in Atlanta doesn't mean its impact is necessarily limited locally. "Anyone, anywhere can make a difference in someone's life," Amy says. "You don't need to be in a particular city, be a certain age, have a certain amount of money or be an adult having achieved lots in your life to make a difference. You just need to have an idea and work with the resources you have to make it happen."

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