

## Giving up gifts for a good cause

**Charity: Local business paying it forward one birthday at a time**

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Thandi Fletcher/OWW

Okotoks-based family business Forward Sharing are promoting the Pay it Forward concept for the birthday parties, where children ask for donations to a local charity in lieu of birthday gifts. From left, Carol Perkins with granddaughters Taylor, 10, and Rhegan, 8, and their mother Trish Pujos-Michel.

The Pay it Forward movement has been going strong since the 2000 release of the book and Hollywood film of the same name, and it's now even taking root in Okotoks.

Forward Sharing, an Okotoks-based company, has embraced the Pay it Forward concept through helping children use their birthday parties as an occasion to benefit local charities and others in need.

With the help of Forward Sharing, children hold Pay it Forward parties in which they ask that donations be made to a charity organization of their choosing in lieu of birthday gifts.

"It's about sharing and trying to teach our kids that the expectation of material things has gotten out of hand," said Carol Perkins, president and co-owner of Forward Sharing. "These days, it's all about who can outdo the next party."

Created by Perkins and her daughter Trish Pujos-Michel, the inspiration behind the company came about five years ago when Pujos-Michel's oldest daughter Taylor, now 10, went to a friend's birthday party in their hometown of Nelson, B.C.

It was a Pay it Forward-themed birthday, where it was requested that donations be made to their local food bank instead of birthday gifts.

"The children were actually really excited about it," said Pujos-Michel.

Since then, Taylor and her younger sister Rhegan, 8, have held charity birthday parties every year.

"That started a reaction with all the friends in their circle, and now there's a whole community of kids in Nelson who do it," said Perkins.

Perkins said her hope is that Forward Sharing parties will help to put a stop to the prevailing trend of consumerism and one-upmanship that comes with gift-giving at children's birthday parties.

"When kids get so many gifts, they seem to start losing the appreciation for it," said Perkins. "A lot of gifts either get thrown in the closet or broken, or do they even get looked at?"

The added benefit of a Pay it Forward party, Perkins said, is that the focus becomes celebrating the child, rather than the amount of gifts they receive.

Still, convincing some kids to give up their birthday loot can be a challenge, she said.

"You hate to give up a day for yourself where you do get a lot of gifts, but we find that parents and grandparents do still give gifts anyway," Perkins said. "So it's not like they go without any."

Pujos-Michel agreed it is a sacrifice for some children, but a positive one.

"When they see what happens, they learn that the gift of giving most times is way better than the gifts," she said.

To help further the concept, Forward Sharing sells birthday party kits that promote the importance of sharing, along with environmental awareness.

Each kit includes reusable bags, copies of Shelby's Special Birthday colouring book, and party invitations for 10 guests.

The invitations explain the birthday child's charity of choice and how guests may contribute to the cause, while the storybook, written and illustrated by Pujos-Michel, helps to explain the Pay it Forward concept.

Guests are encouraged to make crafts or baked treats during the party that they can take home in their reusable goodie bags, said Pujos-Michel.

The party kits are environmentally friendly, made using biodegradable, recycled or post-consumer materials wherever possible. Forward Sharing also donates a portion of its gross sales to charitable organizations.

While children can choose any charity they wish to benefit from their Pay it Forward party, Perkins said there is a strong need to help those who don't necessarily qualify for charity assistance.

"I'm hoping those who hold charity birthday parties can help someone within their community," she explained. "Anybody who has had a bit of bad luck, like the fellow down the street who has lost his job, or has lost his wife and is supporting the kids."

Pujos-Michel gave the example of a family friend who ended up in the burn unit at a Vancouver hospital after falling into a campfire.

"That year, my kids asked for donations to the burn unit for one of their birthday parties," she said.

Ultimate, the goal is that those who have been helped by a Pay it Forward party will help another person in need.

"We're hoping to kind of spread it around," said Perkins. "It's the Pay it Forward concept – you do a random acts of kindness for people who in turn then will pass it on."

For more information on how you can host a Pay it Forward party, visit

[www.inspireyourchildren.com](http://www.inspireyourchildren.com)

[tfletcher@okotoks.greatwest.ca](mailto:tfletcher@okotoks.greatwest.ca)

We sincerely thank the Okotoks Western Wheel for publishing this article on how we help to Inspire Children One Birthday at a Time.

Thank you for taking the time to read this month's newsletter and we wish you well.

Cheers, Tricia

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