

Snow Ball in Kansas City Brightens Kids' Holidays

By Rebecca Cross

This December the Lawyers Association of Kansas City-Young Lawyers Section (LAKC-YLS) will host its fourth annual Santa Snow Ball event at the law offices of Lathrop & Gage LLP. The ball is held each winter for families with children staying in homeless shelters and transitional housing in the Kansas City, Missouri, area during the holidays.

This year LAKC-YLS President Erin Schilling will oversee the event and expects to host approximately 100 children and their parents from nine Kansas City shelters. Between forty and fifty volunteers are expected to assist at the event, during which families are provided a holiday meal. Children receive toys, books, and essential winter clothing such as hats, mittens, and gloves. Boys and girls also get to have their photographs taken with Santa and participate in crafts projects, face paintings, movie screenings, and book readings.

Most Rewarding

Although Santa Snow Ball is just one of many activities that LAKC-YLS manages, Schilling says it is certainly one of the most rewarding. "Our entire board looks forward to this event every year," Schilling stated. "The look on the children's faces when they see Santa is priceless."

LAKC-YLS spends more than \$4,000 to cover the costs of the event, which include meals, gifts, and craft supplies. This year the Kansas City local affiliate received a \$400 Public Service Subgrant for the event from the ABA YLD, with support from the ABA Fund for Justice and Education. LAKC-YLS also depends on funding and in-kind contributions for the ball from attorneys, law firms, and local area businesses to ensure that each homeless child receives a warm meal and some holiday gifts.

The ABA YLD plays a greater role in the Santa Snow Ball than just providing funding. Former LAKC-YLS President Renee Parsons got the idea for Santa Snow Ball four years ago at an ABA YLD conference, when she heard someone from another local affiliate describe a similar event. "It was just a brainstorming workshop where someone mentioned it," Parsons said, "and I took the idea and ran with it." Parsons knew that there were a number of homeless shelters in the downtown Kansas City area and recognized a way for LAKC-YLS to make an impact. "I thought it would be a great opportunity for us as young lawyers to reach out to the community," she said.

The event has more than doubled in size since its inception in 2005, when approximately forty children attended. LAKC-YLS rotates through a list of Kansas City's homeless shelters and transitional housing units from year to year to give each organization a fair opportunity to participate.

Parsons stressed that part of the project's success has been its relatively low cost. "It's a program that suits the needs of lots of young lawyer sections or affiliates on a budget," she said. "It takes a lot of hours, but it doesn't take a lot of manpower or people to start the program." Parsons recommended that affiliates interested in beginning a similar program reach out to their local area shelters first. "Find out what their needs are and whether they'd be interested in a program like this," she stated.

Popular with Volunteers

The other aspect that makes this program an easy one, according to Parsons, is how popular it is with volunteers. LAKC-YLS requests volunteers not just among its own membership, but also law firm personnel and families, including children. "Those kids relate to the other kids," Parsons noted, "and it's a great opportunity to get kids in our community involved in volunteerism."

LAKC-YLS Immediate Past President Mara Cohara echoes Parsons' comments. Cohara oversaw last year's ball, which she described as a "huge success," despite winter weather conditions in Kansas City last December. "Everybody—from partners to staff—everybody wants to volunteer and do something, whether it's give money, or buy presents," Cohara said. "Everyone wants to be part of it."

The event is not just special for the attorneys participating; it's also a godsend for the children and parents. According to the Homeless Services Coalition of Greater Kansas City, there are more than 1,600 homeless children in the city at any given time. In fact, children make up approximately 40 percent of Kansas City's entire homeless population. Families with children constitute well over half of the homeless population in the city. Homeless Services Coalition of Greater Kansas City,

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Now in its fourth year, Santa Snow Ball is beginning to gain traction in the community as an annual opportunity for homeless boys and girls to celebrate the holidays. "It's becoming something the shelters look forward to, and the kids really look forward to it," Cohara said.

Speaking from his North Pole workshop, Santa Claus said he too is eagerly awaiting this year's event, which is named in his honor. "The Kansas City kids are a most deserving bunch," Claus opined. "And last time I checked my list, they had all been good!"

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