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Talking trash: Rhonda Bannard makes birthday bashes sustainability lessons

Phoenix Business Journal - by [Annalyn Censky](#) Phoenix Business Journal

Instead of "Pin the Tail on the Donkey," kids at Rhonda Bannard's birthday parties play with trash.

The name of the game is EcoRace. It's an obstacle course made of reused and recycled items, and it's part of a sustainability-themed birthday party her new company will plan for its clients. Kids learn about eco-friendly materials ranging from light bulbs to toilet paper.

Bannard launched **Inspired Birthdays** earlier this year. The service offers customized birthday parties under five educational themes: sustainability, animals, health and wellness, arts and theater, and community service.

The eco-friendly parties, designed for ages 5 to 14, also feature local nonprofit partners.

Bannard is a former television personality and marketing and communications executive for the **Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce**. She launched **Inspired Connections**, the parent company of Inspired Birthdays, with funds from her own pocket in 2005.

Birthday parties, she said, don't have to be about presents and sugary treats.

"I've seen some parties that are outrageous, from 2-year-olds getting mountains of gifts to families taking little kids to Las Vegas for a show," she said. "Inspired Birthdays are about 'How can we grow our children as stewards of tomorrow?' It's an opportunity for us to celebrate the child in a meaningful way."

Local nonprofits including the **Sierra Club's** Grand Canyon Chapter and **Liberty Wildlife** collaborate with the company to design the party themes and teach kids about giving back through community service and everyday acts such as turning off the water while brushing their teeth.

No balloons

There aren't any balloons at these parties. Everything is eco-friendly, nontoxic and organic -- T-shirts, cupcakes, lunches, reusable cotton goody bags, even the cleaning supplies used after each event.

Instead of junk from a dollar store, Bannard said, goodies might include membership to a nonprofit organization or tickets to **Valley Youth Theatre**, another of the company's nonprofit partners.

The parties, which start at \$1,250 for 10 kids, can be hosted at a variety of educational venues, including a yoga studio, park, nature preserve or art studio.

Bannard, the single mother of two children, ages 7 and 9, hopes it's a concept other concerned moms can get behind.



Jim Poulin/Phoenix Business Journal

Rhonda Bannard takes EcoMan, a wire sculpture kids decorate with recycled items, to local events to promote her company, Inspired Birthdays.

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Jane Christensen, a former **Heart Ball** chairwoman and board member of the **Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center**, is one such mom.

"We're looking at doing a little bit more than just having birthday parties for our kids," she said. "We're looking at celebrating our children, but also teaching them important lessons about giving back. Certainly when my children's birthdays come in October and November, we will have an Inspired Birthday."

Sandy Bahr, conservation outreach director for the local Sierra Club, said the startup company gives her nonprofit a unique opportunity to spread its message to children and parents in a fun way.

"A lot of times we're doing lectures or presentations to adults. And, even in a classroom, the reception for the message is a bit different," she said. "At the birthdays, they're getting the message, but they're having fun, too."

Inspired Birthdays hosted its first party in February, with 60 children. Bannard said she hasn't booked any others yet.

She takes EcoMan, a wire sculpture decorated with recycled items by kids, to local events to promote the company. Their next stop is Earth Day at the Garden, an April 20 event at the **Desert Botanical Garden**.

Get connected

Inspired Birthdays: www.inspiredbirthdays.com

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