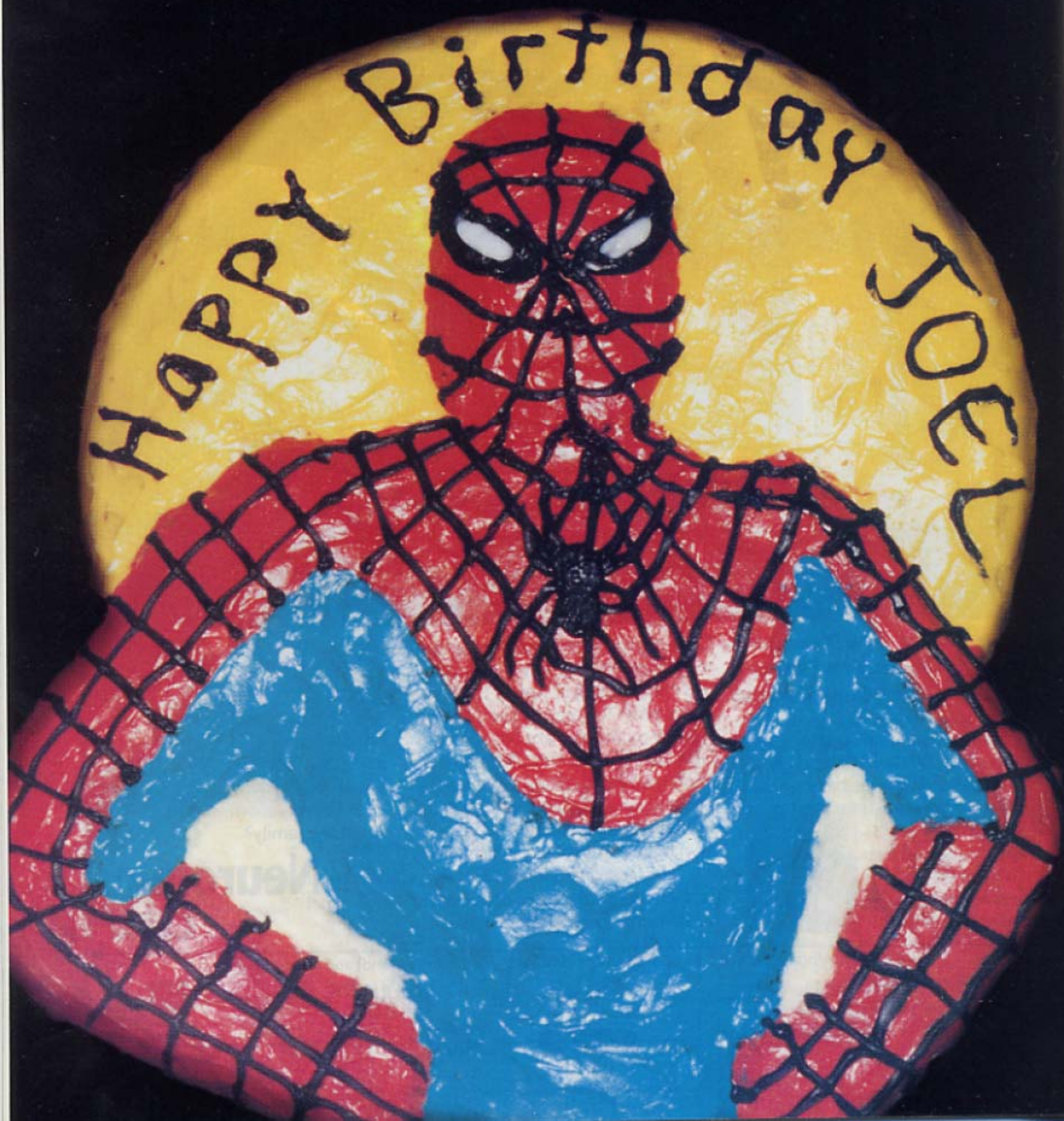


BIRTHDAYS THAT DON'T BREAK THE BANK

Nothin' Like Homemade

BY BETSY R. ROSENTHAL



My soon-to-be three year old's birthday was rapidly approaching. We avoided making a public show of Joel's first and second anniversaries. We got off easy. He didn't ask; we didn't suggest. Frankly, I needed a break after hosting parties year after year for my two older children. But this year my little guy specifically requested a party — a big party. A Spiderman party.

Since we don't go in for hired outside entertainment (I'm not sure whether it's a sign of the times or a sign of where we live — Los Angeles — but at the vast majority of parties my children attend, moon bounces, pony rides, and professional costumed characters are standard fare), I did what I often do when I'm stuck for an original party idea — comb the aisles of a junk discount store.

This time I happened upon a stack of unbelievably inexpensive teddy bear-shaped wooden footstools. Knowing how invaluable stools are to curious preschoolers, I filled my cart to the ceiling with every stool the store had for sale. Eyeing my struggle through the aisles with a cart full of teetering stools, my fellow shoppers flashed me inquisitive looks. "An art project for my son's birthday party," I answered, which lowered their raised eyebrows.

At the party, each parent praised my idea and asked me where I had found the stools so they could do the same for their child's birthday celebration. There was collective disappointment that day when I announced that I had bought out the store.

The kids loved the stool-painting project. We spread out old sheets on folding tables set up in the backyard, put out craft paints in all colors, sponge brushes and paintbrushes, and watched our budding Picassos. Those who weren't ready to plunge into painting instead made necklaces out of O-shaped fruit cereal and colorful lanyard string at a separate table.

Once there was paint everywhere and even a little bit on the stools, we ushered the kids inside for an under-rehearsed puppet show performed by my husband and my seven-year-old daughter. They told the story of Little Red Riding Hood using a three-in-one puppet, a transformable puppet that turns into all three characters.

While they entertained the troops, I transformed the painting table into an eating table and set out the decorate-your-own-cupcake necessities. Each child got a plain homemade cupcake to start. Bowls of blue, green, purple, and pink frosting were on the table, as well as a colorful assortment of small candies. Many of the cupcakes ended up resembling Mt. Everest under an avalanche of M & Ms.

For the grand finale we brought out the Spiderman carrot cake. The adults reached for their own plates at that moment. The truth is, when I serve my homemade carrot cake, I'm assailed by recipe requests. We always shape and decorate our cakes according to our birthday child's specifications. For our son's Aladdin party, we made a magic lamp-shaped cake; for another year's ghost-theme party, the carrot cake was formed as a ghost, frosted white with black M & M eyes. For a bowling party when my son turned six, we designed tandem cakes: a bowling pin and a bowling ball. I'm the baker; my husband's the chief cake architect and icer, and it's become a family tradition for us to stay up until at least midnight the night before the birthday party working on the cake. When we're finally





done, and completely exhausted and punchy, we take pictures of our masterpiece.

Because we sent out Spiderman invitations for our three year old's party, his little friends probably expected the superhero to show up in the flesh, web and all. Instead, they got to eat part of his head or his web from the cake, frolic in a backyard adorned with Spiderman paper decorations, and munch peanut butter sandwiches off Spiderman plates. The guests had fun anyway, and I don't think Spiderman was missed. Joel's party was the talk of the town the entire week. The parents complimented me on the activities and told us how impressed they were that we had done everything ourselves.

It may be that kids today prefer the pony ride/petting zoo/laser tag parties they go to so frequently. But I'm not convinced. My older son still remembers his ghost party, where the guests wore sheets, ate eyeballs and brains (lime gelatin with grapes), and did freeze-dancing to "The Monster Mash." My daughter still talks about her red party. She colored her invitations red, wore a red dress, and even the food—beet chips and strawberries—fit the color scheme. And I know the memories—for example, of the tree fort building party, where every kid went home with his own hardware-store hammer and got to sign his name on the floor of the tree fort he helped to build—will stay with them forever. This year my older son is having a slumber party in the very same tree fort that many of his guests helped build the previous year.

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Believe me, I am no Martha Stewart. The right side of my brain is not very well developed, but I've found that a little ingenuity and a return to simplicity can go a long way in putting on a kids' party.

Maybe we do the homegrown parties to imbue certain values in our kids. Maybe we do them to save money. Or just maybe we do them so we can pat ourselves on the back at the end of the day and say to each other, "We did it again, honey. We threw another great party!"

WHEN I'M STRUGGLING TO COME UP WITH BIRTHDAY party ideas, the first place I go for inspiration is my children. They often suggest the theme based on some hobby or activity they're into at the time. Then I'm off to the local art supply store or junk discount store for materials and more ideas. Here are some activities that have made for successful parties:

Make-your-own-pizza: Each child gets a small ball of dough and a pie pan. They flatten the dough crust into the pan, then add the pizza fixin's. Shredded cheese, sauce, olives mushrooms, etc., are all on the table, ready to be incorporated into their culinary masterpieces.

T-shirt painting: Buy white T-shirts, shaped sponges, and fabric paints in a variety of colors. Cut up cardboard pieces that can be slipped inside the shirts to keep the fronts and backs from sticking together. Don't forget to spread out lots of newspaper!

Hat painting: Buy simple caps, white if possible, and fabric paints. A less messy variation on this theme is visor decorating, using plastic visors, markers, and stickers.

Makeup party: All you need is nail polish, nail polish remover, cotton balls, lipsticks, and hand mirrors. Kids can paint their toes, too!

Tea party: One year we combined a makeup party with a tea party. I served finger sandwiches and little cookies and cakes on the good china, set out with cloth napkins. I served herbal tea to the tea drinkers and fruit juice to the others. Don't forget the high-brow background music.



Sports party: My son is a baseball fiend, so we took all the kids to the park to play baseball, dads versus sons. Popcorn and peanuts were served, of course. The boys ended up at our house for a baseball card-trading session, barbecue (hot dogs), and a slumber party. The party favors were decks of trading cards.

Treasure hunt: I hid rhyming clues all around our house and backyard. The final clue led to a treasure chest filled with small toys and candy for each child. Another version, for pre-readers, is to wrap each prize in a different-colored wrapping paper. Each child is given a piece of wrapping paper and must find his or her prize wrapped in that paper, hidden somewhere in the house.

Slumber party: Freeze-dancing and charades are classic "overnighter" fun. A video before bed can help quiet down the troops. In warm weather, it can turn into a camping party. All the kids bring sleeping bags and pitch a tent in the backyard. Give them flashlights to use; they can take them home as party favors. Of course, all the meals are eaten outside, cooked on the barbecue. Paperback ghost stories to read aloud in the tent is a great addition, and other good party favors could be compasses and mess kit utensils.

Holiday theme party: For an October birthday, we had individual pumpkins for the children to carve (with help from their parents, of course). At our October ghost party, all the kids came in white sheets. We played the spiderweb game, in which each child was given a spool of different-colored yarn. They had to follow their yarn through the family room, which looked like a giant spiderweb of yarn, until they located the prize tied to the other end of their spool. The prizes were ghost canteens I had found at a discount store.

A former lawyer, Betsy R. Rosenthal is a freelance writer and the mother of three children: Adam, 10, Sara, 8, and Joel, 3. She and her husband David struggle, in the affluent community in which they've found themselves, to teach their children that the best memories cannot be bought. ➤

Making the BIG DAY SPECIAL

BY LINDA BATT

"You're making an awful fuss," I told a friend many years back when she arrived with gifts, balloons, and sang a chorus of "Happy Birthday" to my two year old.

"Your birthday belongs to you," she told me. "Christmas, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, everyone celebrates those days. When people celebrate your birthday, they are celebrating your life." I realized she was right, and from that day on, I tried to make the birthdays of the people I love very special.

I observed the ways friends and family members commemorated their children's birthdays, and added elements of their celebrations to my repertoire. Some ideas I used year-in, year-out; others were added at the appropriate age. But our family always made an "awful fuss" over birthdays. Now, I'm joining in the celebration of my grandchildren's special days. Here are simple ways I have found over the years to add pizzazz to the anniversary of the day a child was born.

Remember that special day of birth with your child. Look at pictures from the day of birth together, and tell your child stories about what happened. For my middle child, I told and retold the story of the first night after his birth every year until he was a teenager: "The nurse, a stout warmhearted woman, brought you to me. She