

How do you “celebrate” a birthday for a child that passed away?

At the Aarnoutse household, birthday parties are usually over the top and filled with fun, family, and end up with your face in a cake.

On what would have been Willem’s first birthday they did it very differently. They decided, in his memory, to be kind and loving to others on that day. In the morning of January 10, the family went to the Maternity Ward of the Royal Alexandra Hospital and they brought Dutch “Krakelingen” pastry cookies for the staff and delivered 20 bags filled with some of Carolyn’s favorite items that a new mother would love. One of the items was a swaddling blanket with the words: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made”. This was part of the text from Willem’s funeral service. Amazingly, Adrian and Carolyn and the kids were able to personally deliver a bag to a couple who just had a baby. That was a very special moment for all of us and a highlight of the day.

In the afternoon, the entire family went to Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at the Stollery Children’s Hospital. This is where Willem spent the last three days of his life. They delivered more cookies and a large number of toys that would be comforting and useful for the sick and their families. Carolyn spent the last number of months organizing and preparing donations from companies such as: Lego, Manhattan toys, Bumbo, Melissa and Doug, Bass Pro Shop and the list goes on.

Carolyn also organized donations of toiletries from businesses such as Lush, Wet Brush, Cloud 9 Pajamas and The Van Berkels. Together as family they put together care packages for parents who are suddenly stuck at the hospital with little or no time to prepare.

The staff at both hospitals were overwhelmed, amazed and very emotional that they would take the time to do this and remember others who were in either situation of Willems short life. From the joy when he was born to the hopelessness when he was in the hospital.

They also worked with Siebe and Joni Koopman at Dutch Delicious to give out 100 bags of raisin buns with a note:

“Life is a gift. Enjoy it, share it, and spread love to the people around you,
Please do something nice for someone today in honor of our son Willem Kees Huig Aarnoutse, as today would have been his birthday”

Siebe wrote on his Facebook page that “today we are also breaking bread as a community, besides the regular breaking of bread together; no one in this world is just for themselves”.

Throughout the day the family received beautiful messages of encouragement of their acts of kindness that they had done in honor of Willem. Such as paying for a stranger’s groceries, sponsoring a child, and donating to the Stollery.

We only had Willem for a short 6 months, but we are thankful that he was able to donate his heart and his liver to two desperate infants on the other side of the country. The lives of those two babies were spared because of their generosity.

A few months ago, we received information that both transplants were successful, and the babies are doing well. They also got a letter from one of the families expressing their thankfulness. Adrian and Carolyn then wrote letters to the recipient families telling them what they could about their Willem’s life journey.

Yes, the Aarnoutse family surely celebrated Willem’s birthday not as usual, but one of sharing, loving, and giving of themselves on that day. It was out of thankfulness for all the support and prayers they received during their time of mourning from the church family, friends, and acquaintances.

*At the end of the day, it's not about what you have or lost,
It's about who you've lifted up.
Who you've made better
It is about what you've given back.
It is about the Christ like ability to deny ourselves and serve others*