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Party planner runs studio of different stripe for kids

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Princesses, pirates and dozens of other characters visit a small, eclectic studio in High Point each week where one woman makes all of their theme-party dreams come true.

Michelle Lyman, who opened From Art to Zebras on North Main Street in High Point in October, plans and executes custom-themed parties and offers a wide variety of art projects and crafts for kids as young as 1 year old.

Lyman started From Art to Zebras in 2003, holding art camps and classes at her home, clients' homes and in rented spaces.

Lyman decorated her new warehouse-style studio and painted it in bright colors. It's full of unstuffed animals, costumes (for the kids and the animals) and craft supplies. A life-size plastic zebra stands near the front door.

Almost every piece of furniture and shelving in the studio is moveable so that it can be rearranged for a party as needed.

Lyman gets five to 10 party requests each week and plans two to four of them for each weekend. She will plan a party around almost any theme, but the most popular are spa, pop star and princess parties. For the spa parties, girls can make their own shower gel or lip gloss. Lyman does more princess parties than any other each month.

Though Lyman makes party packages that clients can use at home, each party has an aspect unique to the child it celebrates, she said.

"Parents give me ideas or they will tell me the kids' favorite things," she said. "I find some interest and incorporate it. I like it when they bring the kids in because they know what they want."

Lyman said she tries to stay away from licensed theme parties because they go out of style so quickly, but if someone is a die-hard "Star Wars" fan, she won't hesitate to plan a party, character visits and all.

Children dress up, play games such as "princess and the pea" or go on small "quests" like a treasure hunt with lots of quick games to keep younger kids' attention. At the end, they are crowned princess or receive a goody bag, depending on the theme.

Lyman's husband, Jimmy, recently joined the From Art to Zebras crew and often plays characters for co-ed or boys' parties.

Gina Webb, another part-time employee, used to do day care in her home and missed working with kids, she said. She helps set up and facilitate parties, as well as occasionally playing a character.

"I thought it would be neat to play princess sometimes," Webb said. "The little girls that came in this morning were just in awe. They thought I was the real Belle."

Webb, who was working her first weekend, said she'd noticed something else about Lyman's princess parties that attracted her.

"She incorporates values into the party," she said. "She teaches the kids to earn wisdom, loyalty and

love jewels. It's not about being a brat princess."

From Art to Zebras parties are not just for kids; Lyman has done kids' areas for company picnics that turned into parties for the whole crowd. Last year a "Survivor"-themed kids' party for Avid Solutions intrigued the adults, as well.

Lyman's parties have ranged from \$150 to \$2,000. She said the cost depends on how the client wants to customize and how many guests attend.

In addition to holding parties, Lyman sells retail items such as wall art and stuffed animal kits and holds kids' art classes and summer camps.

Each Monday the studio rotates to a new craft that youngsters come in and do at any time during the week for about 30 minutes and costing about \$5. Stuffing animals is also an option, costing from \$12 to \$15.

When children choose an animal to stuff, Lyman leads them to the stuffing machine and asks them if they want the animal "flat or floppy" so she knows how much stuffing to put in. She then gives them a wishing star -- a small polyester-satin star that goes into the animal after the boy or girl makes a wish.

"I really like it when kids give me a hug afterward and tell me how much they loved (the party)," she said. "It really warms me up."

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