**Organization Information**

Since 2011, Best Christmas Ever (BCE) has been bringing generosity and hope to Minnesota families. Our founder, Don Liimatainen, knows firsthand what it feels like to be on the receiving end of a community’s generosity. He was the young father of a 3-year-old and was battling Ulcerative Colitis at Christmas time. Incapable of shopping for presents, and at his lowest moment, he was surprised with two full bags of gifts on Christmas Eve 2010. This unexpected act of kindness turned what would have been his worst Christmas into the ‘Best Christmas Ever.’

Don wanted to pay that generosity forward, and in 2011, a small group of friends and family came together to surprise a family with their own Best Christmas Ever. This was just the beginning. That small group had the vision to increase the number of families surprised each year, and they have. Additional wraparound programs including financial literacy and wellness have been added through the years.

Some Minnesota families were already struggling before a global pandemic gripped the nation. An unprecedented decline in economic activity has impacted Minnesota families through layoffs, furloughs, and lost income. BCE is more motivated than ever to provide hope and joy to families. Each year, BCE receives over 1,000 nominations. Each nomination represents a struggling family that has had extreme, and unexpected financial hardship. About 1 in 7 families are able to be chosen for a BCE experience. Funding from the Fred C. and Katherine B. Andersen Foundation will help ensure that we can meet the needs of local families and provide them the Best Christmas Ever.

***Our life has forever changed thanks to the BCE. We can't wait to continue to improve our lives financially and be able to pay it forward in the upcoming Christmas season. Thank you for being an enormous blessing to our family in more ways than we could ever describe.***

***-The Andersons***

**Mission and Goals**

BCE’s mission is to provide a generational life change to families who have fallen on tough times through no fault of their own. Falling on hard times whether from job loss, health issues, or personal reasons, can leave a family in a very difficult place. BCE comes alongside these families and offers support and mentorship that is tailored to each family’s circumstances.

Organizational goals help drive our vision of *Bringing hope to families through committed volunteers acting with bold generosity.*  They include:

* Providing generational life change to families
* Providing custom and unique Best Christmas Ever experience for each family
* Providing year-round educational programs that reinforce changes in health and financial wellbeing

We will change the lives of 150 families this year. Families who are nominated typically have had a challenging year that involves having some sort of health crisis. Team captains and volunteers work with community partners and local businesses to ensure that families have the Best Christmas Ever.

After experiencing the hope and joy surrounding a BCE event, families are also encouraged to continue their BCE experience through Financial Literacy and Wellness programs. Our ultimate goal is to have 100% of families complete both of our programs. We will continue to improve until this goal is met because we believe in creating a generational life change for every family.

**Impact and Successes**

Since 2011, we have served 451 families or 1,804 individuals and have distributed over $4,000,000 in program goods and services to our recipients. In our first year, we helped 5 people. We have grown considerably since then and this year we will impact 150 families or over 600 people with gifts, services, and training programs that can improve their financial management and personal health and wellness.

**Purpose of Grant**

**Situation – Need in the Community**

Financial crises, especially when caused by a major health event or other life circumstance, can affect any family at any time. Many of the families that are nominated for Best Christmas Ever have suffered from a family member’s catastrophic illness. BCE helps fill the gap for families who are living paycheck to paycheck but do not qualify or do not apply for social services programs.

For those already living in poverty, one event can push them right over the edge. Poverty exists in all areas of Minnesota. In urban centers like Minneapolis and St. Paul, poverty is well known. Census information indicates that 40% of urban residents are considered impoverished. The rising cost of housing is also financially stressing as 36.3% are considered to be cost-burdened – that includes a whopping 49.5% of renters who are considered cost-burdened.

Poverty has also shifted to the suburbs where from 2000 to 2015 there was a 57% growth in residents living below the poverty line (Brookings Institute, 2017). This is especially problematic as the suburbs are spread out, cross multiple jurisdictions, and have fewer resources than urban centers. These financial stresses force families to skip meals, not take prescription medication, or delay health care. Poverty is evident in outstate Minnesota as well where it is even more difficult to find support and services.

The need for our programs is evidenced by the fact that nominations far outpace our ability to fulfill the requests. In 2019, we received 1,540 nominations we were able to serve 126 of these families. This year we will serve 150 families, 60% of whom are in the 7-county Twin Cities Metro area. We also serve outstate Minnesota with concentrations of support in Duluth, Cloquet, and Alexandria.

**Current Programs and Activities**

**Best Christmas Ever**

Our organization was founded around the desire to provide families with a life changing experience at Christmas time. Through the years, BCE has tied the community and businesses together to fulfill a dream gift list for a local family that has fallen. The process begins with a nomination from a concerned friend, family member, or community member.

Nominations made within the submission window using the online nomination form will be considered. Nominated families must have at least one (1) school-aged child in the household. Self-nominations are not accepted. Nominations are kept confidential so that recipient families can be surprised. Volunteer team captains review nominations, and select a family for their team. Once a family is selected, the person making the nomination works closely with team captains to provide information regarding the family. This helps make the experience unique for that particular family and their circumstances.

BCE volunteers find and collaborate with a local business willing to help a nominated family who doesn’t know they've been selected. Businesses like Orange Theory and Jerry’s Foods put gift ideas on cards and then place the cards on a Christmas tree located within the business. Customers then buy the gifts and return them to the business unwrapped. Volunteers then wrap the gifts and give them to the family.

The average value of a BCE experience is $10,000 and doesn’t just include items that you can put under the tree. Each team brings 10 gifts per family and at least $5,000 for a life-changing gift. Items such as a new furnace or a new washer and dryer might be included. Other examples of items that families have received are help with mortgage/rent payments and needed medical equipment that isn’t covered by insurance. Once all of the items and services are procured and ready, the nominator and the BCE team surprises the BCE family by arriving on their doorstep ready to provide the Best Christmas Ever.

**Financial Literacy**

BCE works with families who are in the midst of personal and financial crises. When Christmas is over, these financial realities remain. To help families manage what money they have, and to help them acquire knowledge and skills to make good financial decisions, we offer the Dave Ramsey Financial Peace University (FPU) Course. This 9-lesson training helps BCE families learn to budget and manage their debt. It also teaches them longer-term lessons in savings and asset building and provides skills to help navigate insurance, mortgages, and retirement.

Families learn to develop a plan to maximize limited resources. Once they complete the course, they are given an additional $1000 grant to help them pay down some of their debt. BCE families can use this education to work toward financial freedom. This successful program is impacting lives in meaningful ways. The following is from a family of 5 with 3 children under 3 where the father was struggling with stage 4 Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

***“We felt like we were in a deep dark hole that kept getting deeper and darker. We are proud to say that after 5 months of starting the financial education course, we are $50,000 lighter! Thank you!”***

***- Zac and Shailee***

**Total Wellness Program**

When a family is struggling financially and may be experiencing the stress of caregiving or job loss, healthy living and healthy eating can take a backseat. It is well documented that health and wellness programs can reduce health risks and health care costs. BCE offers an 8-week Total Wellness Health program that focuses on how to live a healthy lifestyle and teaches wellness principles for the whole family.

The online training course helps families first build awareness about their health status and then provides opportunities to take action. Biometric data is incorporated to individualize recommendations and to help with health status and progress tracking. BCE families receive a variety of educational resources including articles, newsletters, and information on all aspects of well-being. The program encourages lifestyle changes through positive thinking and behavioral change methods, and uses videos, motivational emails, and a participant workbook. Recipes are included that help users practice healthy eating habits.

All adults in the household have to attend all 8 weeks of training. After completion of the 8-week course, families receive $1,000 in gift cards (e.g. Cub, Hyvee, Lunds/Byerlys) to be used toward the purchase of fresh, healthy food.

***This program was amazing! I learned so much about good bodily health. I did not know about the food groups and what a balanced meal should incorporate before this. This program will help me, as a mother of six kids, to instill healthy food habits to my children. I am thankful for being a part of this! Very easy to do and the benefits were great!***

 ***-Wellness Program Attendee***

**Future Programs**

Our long-term vision includes the ability to impact mental health as well. Eventually, we hope to be able to support families by providing them with a trusted network of therapists and psychologists who are willing to donate their time and support.

 **Relationship with Other Organizations**

BCE has worked with hundreds of small businesses. Their employees and clients help fulfill the gift lists of nominated families. When the list is complete, the employees then get together for a wrapping party and prepare the gifts for delivery. Local businesses have also been involved in providing life-changing gifts for BCE families including cars, houses, and even a medical training dog.

The MN Vikings also collaborate with BCE to change the lives of struggling Minnesota families. They have surprised one of our families on the field during halftime of a game and have also completed many drops using players and other key personnel to surprise our BCE families.

**Board, Staff, and Volunteers**

BCE’s 6-member Board of Directors leverages experience from business, advocacy, nonprofits, sales, and marketing to provide oversight and direction to the organization. There are 2 full-time and 1 part-time employees that rely on the passionate engagement of 1,500 volunteers to drive program results.

Volunteers play many key roles for BCE and include team leaders are called captains who undergo 8 weeks of training and upon completion, typically lead a team of at least 10 volunteers. Additional roles include:

1. Key Advocate/rainmaker Each team is challenged to raise $5,000 in a peer-to-peer model.
2. Nominator- Critical to the entire BCE process as they know the family. They help build the gift list and help us plan and personalize the big surprise.
3. Documenter- This person documents the entire journey from the moment the family is selected
4. Purchaser- this person selects a card from the tree and purchases the requested gifts.
5. Gift wrapper- Wrap gifts for the families that you will surprise.
6. Drop Team- This is the crew of people who deliver the gifts to the families.
7. Event Volunteer- Typically, our main fundraiser requires 40 volunteers who help plan, design, setup, work registration, and help with the silent and live auction.
8. BCE also relies on key volunteers that help drive organizational success including social media, video production, flyer design, digital graphics, and technology support.

***When we bring " A Christmas" to a family and then perform the "Drop" I have noticed a common reaction at every event, it is never about the "Presents", it is always about the "Presence". The hugs and tears happen well before a single gift is opened. The love and compassion that a family feels when they realize they are not alone at this special time of year, is something no amount of money can ever buy. "***

***-Volunteer Al Birman.***

**Long-Term Funding**

To sustain our programs, BCE actively solicits funding from foundations, corporations, businesses, and individuals. We typically hold an annual fundraising gala event that will not be held this year due to COVID-19 and its social distancing requirements. Instead, we are conducting a new initiative to help fund operations and program services. We have created *The North Pole Fund* which engages our leaders in a new giving plan. This effort leverages key funding relationships and encourages incremental giving. The Board of Directors is participating in this effort. Additionally, our captains each have a goal to personally fundraise $5,000 each.

**III. Evaluation**

Our goal this year is to serve 150 families by surrounding them with hope, joy, and life-lasting change. 75% of BCE families will also enroll in classes that will help them improve their financial management skills and their ability to live a healthy lifestyle despite their circumstances.

BCE measures the impact of its programs in several ways. We track all metrics associated with nominations and selected families. We also conduct multiple surveys to measure our success. Pre and post evaluation surveys are submitted by participants in both financial literacy and total wellness programs. This feedback allows BCE leadership to gauge the effectiveness of these programs. BCE families are surveyed following Christmas drops, and team captains and Board members are also surveyed. We also gather open-ended feedback to gather stakeholder and client feedback. We also survey our volunteer leaders to look for gaps and opportunities.

Don Liimatainen, BCE’s Co-founder and current President & CEO, and Stephanie Nynas, Director of Operation, coordinate the collection of survey and assessment data. The BCE leadership team and Board of Directors use the data to evaluate program impact, identify opportunities, and help inform strategic direction. The results are shared with the community through stakeholder meetings, social media, and through the publication of our annual report.

Interim and outcome reports are also made available to funders that require them.