



Chris Oser (left), Cindy Oser (middle left), Trudy Roth (middle right), & Dan Roth (right) smile for a photo  
(Cred: Facebook)

## OSER ROTH & FRIENDS FEST: CHANGING THE WORLD ONE ANGEL AT A TIME

By Allie Stevens  
For J23II

Three Rivers- a small, low-funded school district with around 2,200 students located in the Southwestern corner of Ohio along the Ohio River. It is a tight-knit community where word travels fast, and everybody knows everybody. In the fall of 2009, Chris and Cindy Oser, a family that has worked in the school district for 30 years and is majorly involved in the community, were planning their annual summer party that had grown too big for their home-- a party then

called Oser Fest. While planning for this annual party, it was discovered that a boy in the community named Blake Garrett was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, which fostered the beginning of something huge.

About  $\frac{1}{6}$  of children aged 3-17 years old have at least one or more developmental disabilities and approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  of children in the U.S. have a chronic condition, according to the Center for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC). Developmental disabilities and conditions derive from an impairment in an individual's physical, learning, language, or behavioral abilities.

When a child is disabled or develops a chronic or terminal condition, the immediate family often becomes their caregiver. A caregiver assists an individual who needs help completing everyday tasks. While this may seem like a logical solution, caregiving can harm an individual's physical and mental health.

According to the CDC, informal or unpaid caregivers and their families often experience economic hardships through lost wages and additional medical expenses. The fear, stress, and trauma associated with having a disability and being a caregiver are pressing issues that most non-disabled individuals are completely unaware their neighbors are struggling with.

Upon spreading the news about Blake, a friend handed Dan a \$100 bill and asked him to give it to the child,

inspiring the families to take immediate action.

Joining forces with Dan and Trudy Roth, the Oser family decided to move the party to a campground in Aurora, Indiana, and decided to sell shirts in Blake's honor-- raising \$5,000 for the boy and his family. There, Oser-Roth & Friends Fest was born.

## You can't do it just once

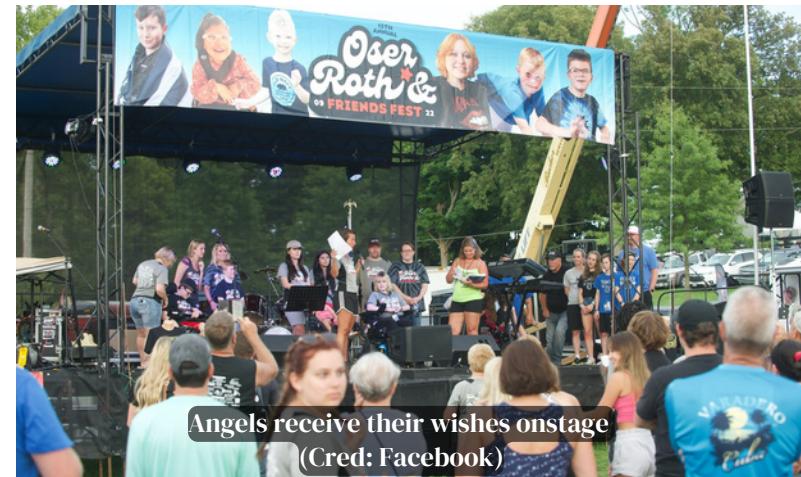
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Fast-forward 14 years, and Oser-Roth & Friends Fest has raised over \$600,000 for 65 "angels"-- the kids affected by developmental disabilities and conditions. When asked in an interview about why they decided to continue the festival, Chris Oser said, "Once we saw what went on with Blake, we all thought, 'You know, we could do a lot more for a lot more children.'"

The community nominates prospective angels every year, and the festival committee gets together and chooses six wonderful, inspiring, and deserving children to be recognized at the party.



Children take advantage of bouncy houses at festival  
(Cred: Facebook)



Angels receive their wishes onstage  
(Cred: Facebook)



Live music plays all night during the festival  
(Cred: Facebook)

When a child is nominated, the organization will reach out to the family and ask for a list of wishes, anything the family or child can think of that they would want or could use to make their lives easier but might not be able to afford. When asked about her inspiration to continue outreach work through Oser-Roth, Trudy Roth said, "It's very fulfilling... To be a part of these kids' lives, to see that we can make a difference, make them smile, or make their daily routine easier, it's an honor for us."

Mother of a 2017 angel, Jackie Hawkins, explains precisely why this kind of work is necessary. "There are so many families just like ours... and there's a lot of families that wouldn't have what they needed... Kids need to feel loved and supported, and parents need to not feel alone."

Oser-Roth & Friends Fest became a nonprofit organization in 2015, and the festival is entirely donation-based. There's no entry fee, and all food and drinks at the event are entirely free but donations are heavily encouraged.



The festival is located at Mission Heights Farm in Aurora, Indiana  
(Cred: Facebook)

All of the proceeds will go to the following year's angels and is the primary source of fundraising for their wishes. On top of the festival, throughout the year, Oser-Roth will do a myriad of things to raise money for the angels, such as selling merchandise and holding fundraisers like motorcycle parades, golf outings, and split the pot. "I think people think that we use the money from donations to help pay for the party, too," Chris says. "Absolutely not. Every donation goes straight to the angels." Oser-Roth will then take every penny raised and buy each angel a handful of their wishes. Come the last weekend of July when it's time for the party, and they will all be invited to the campground to receive them.

The festival is located at Mission Heights Farm in Aurora, Indiana. Upon arrival there are shuttle buses leading to a beautiful lake and seemingly endless family fun with a water

slide, sand volleyball court, life vests, a silent auction, basket raffles, bouncy houses, helicopter rides, a Yokum Fireworks finale, and more. Three Rivers Local School District mother, Meghan McNicholas, explained in an interview why her family has made the festival a tradition they won't miss. "It's really cool to know that you don't have to have a lot of money to make a difference in these kids' lives... It's a tight-knit community, it's safe, and it's great for kids and adults." Food, drinks, music, fun, and everything needed for a successful festival. Despite this, there's a communal agreement that all of that pales in comparison to the real highlight of the festival.

"Seeing the angels' faces after they get their gifts onstage; that is the best part of the event, hands down," the daughter of Chris and Cindy, Caitlyn Oser, says in an interview. "To see the kids that are non-verbal and to see their body language and faces light up, oh my god, I cry every time... How do you see that and not say, 'I want to get involved?'". When it's time to present their wishes, the angels and their families will line up

on the stage in the campground's center, and the entire festival stops to watch. Wishes can range from an accessible porch swing, accessible equipment, a new car, or even a trip voucher for a dream vacation. It's genuinely whatever the family in question desires or requires to make their lives as caretakers easier and increase their child's quality of life.

This festival encapsulates the good that can come from having fun. "This started as our summer party that we held in our backyard," Chris says. "It's been really important to all of us that it stays a party. Now it's morphed into a way to celebrate the lives of these children, but it's still a party." It isn't just the fun and gifts that permanently alter these 'families' lives; it's the endless waves of support from the community that stick with them and change their paths forever.

Brandon Hawkins was a 2017 angel due to an anoxic brain injury he endured in the sixth grade- a brain injury not associated with a blow to the head but rather deprivation of

oxygen to the brain. Despite everything life has thrown at him, Brandon has accomplished significant things, such as publishing his coloring book, attending senior prom, graduating, and even conquering rock climbing. Brandon's wishes included an iPad, a trip voucher to Chicago, and a piece of adaptive equipment inside their home to help Brandon get around more easily. In an interview, Jackie asked Brandon, "When you were on that stage and had everybody chanting 'Bran-don,' couldn't you just feel the love, dude? And didn't that make you want to fight harder?"

Although Brandon can't verbally respond, he does have his way of communicating with his facial expressions and said, "Yes."

"And it continues from there," Jackie says, "They don't just forget about you." Every year, a banner with each angel's face from that year is added to the road entering the campground, welcoming back past angels year after year. Past angels are also welcomed to the stage during the festival to introduce themselves and continue receiving love and support from the community, proving





Festival guests enjoy grand finale Yokum Firework spectacle (Cred: Facebook)

the Oser-Roth love doesn't end when the year does.

## Vision of the Angels

When asked if they could tell people anything about the festival to encourage them to participate, Jackie says, "It is the most amazing, heartwarming organization. They do this truly because they care and are families, just like ours. It isn't a big company; it's just families that come together to do this for such a good cause, and it's also just a blast."

McNicholas says, "Not enough people know. We all get sucked into these busy lives, and you lose sight of things, so it's cool to come together and bring it to your attention." Caitlyn explains the organization's more significant effect, "It's gotten the community more involved. The Three Rivers community

has gotten closer, and they all come out for it. I think it's inspiring other people to do similar actions." Good things bring more good things. This organization shows that kindness and support have a ripple effect that entire communities can feel.

Oser-Roth & Friends Fest is an advocacy, awareness, and assistance-focused non-profit organization that drastically changes people's lives within its community. The committee unanimously says they hope to become more than just a party in the summer. They hope to one day be able to help the entire disability and special needs community with finances and opportunities beyond their grasp. Already having moved mountains with its long list of successes, Oser-Roth & Friends Fest only has room to grow.

# Source Contact Information

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