



SURPRISE! 29 + 1 = FUN

A bash thrown for a high school math teacher's 30th birthday is proof of the theorem that people can party and still be COVID-safe.

By Haley Longman Photography by Amanda Domenech

Each of us has grown in some way during the past year, but not all of us have a party to show for it. Luckily, Latoya Watt does, thanks to her best friend, Chloe Sosa-Jarrett of Hackensack, who surprised her with a 30th-birthday soiree that honored the “blooming” she had done over the past year and decade—and was intimate enough not to run afoul of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines during these bizarre times.

But Sosa-Jarrett didn't do it alone. She reached out to event planner Yosely Maldonado of Garfield-based F&M Events to help her execute her Pinterest board vision, what she described as a “moody yet bright” dinner party that would represent this transformative birthday. “When I was brainstorming the party vibe, I knew we had to have florals everywhere but didn't want it to be reminiscent of a wedding,” Sosa-Jarrett tells BERGEN. “The darker jewel tones and unique blooms made for the perfect aesthetic.”

The intimate gathering took place at the F&M Events venue on March 13, about a year to the day from the time when just about everything shut down in New Jersey. At this same

point in 2021, businesses were beginning to open and parties to be held again, so for Watt's benefit, Sosa-Jarrett devised a believable plan that they would be attending a gala together. She told her pal to dress glam and party-ready.

“Toya was literally stuck at the door for a solid minute,” says her best friend of the well-executed reveal. “She joked that she felt betrayed that we had all been covering up the party plans for a month while she tried to plan something fun and COVID-safe for her birthday to no avail!”

The dark and elegant floral arrangements by Lemon Lab Events, comprising calla lilies, ranunculus, roses, tulips and alstroemeria in Watt's favorite colors, signified the “blooming” she had experienced over the past twelve months, says Maldonado. Other well-thought-out details, such as the custom “29 + 1 = Even More Fun” cake topper, paid homage to the guest of honor's job as a ninth-grade algebra teacher.

Of course, as with any event in 2021, COVID precautions had to be considered as well. The planners ensured that the birthday gal's most important family members and

Ninth-grade math teacher Latoya Watt is a numbers girl, which is why this neon “Thirty” sign from SeViLu Rentals made for the perfect photo backdrop at her 30th birthday bash, planned by Yosely Maldonado of F&M Events in Garfield. “My 30s are going to be all about reaping the harvest as I bloom into a new woman,” says the birthday gal.



Twenty-five guests enjoyed a banquet-style, Jamaican dinner that the family prepared. A moody and sexy jewel-toned palette marked the décor, from the table spaces to the floral arrangements to the custom cake.

friends were on the exclusive guest list of 25. Temperature checks and masks were required at the door—masks were removed only for photos and for eating—and dancing was more limited than it would've been pre-pandemic.

To make this one big (well, figuratively big) family affair, some of Watt's relatives catered the shindig themselves—with Caribbean food as a bow to their Jamaican heritage. Jerk chicken wings, mac and cheese, baked ziti, spicy shrimp, rice and beans, baked chicken and pernil (pulled pork) were served at the banquet-style sit-down meal before the cake by Perfectly Styled & Sweet in Hasbrouck Heights was cut and devoured.

"My favorite part was seeing everyone sit around a big table sharing in a meal," says Sosa-Jarrett. "I come from a big family, and it's probably the thing I've missed most during lockdown: gathering and celebrating each other." The birthday lady's parents, brother, uncle and close friends made speeches, and guests enjoyed posing for pics together at the photo booth supplied by Boujee Booth. "I felt so loved and appreciated by my loved ones' heartwarming words," Watt says.

Ultimately, the celebration was proof that pandemic parties can be smaller-scale yet still stunning. "The intimacy of these events is really nice," says Maldonado. "Guests get to enjoy time with one another in a setting where they can actually speak and have fun in a safe environment."

