



PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM GALLOWAY

## IF THIS IS 40, WHAT WAS I WAITING FOR?

Writer Dana McMahan plans a big birthday bash and discovers what's worth celebrating.

**T**he Great Fortieth Birthday Party – a house party at our home in Detroit – did not start auspiciously. En route from Louisville I received a text from a Detroit neighbor: “We are having a blackout until 11:30 p.m. Friday.” With an acceptance I wouldn’t have had 10 years ago I sent a message to our friends heading up for the event: “Bring flashlights and candles. The power is out but the party’s still on.”

Upon arriving at the house, a century-old brick behemoth we’d spent months rehabbing, we found the plumber had disconnected the water before leaving for the weekend. I’d told my friends to expect urban camping, as we didn’t have a stick of furniture, but no water and no electric? That’s a bit much for anyone, even my intrepid band of friends.

But it would be what it would be, so I worked on the house all day on my birthday while family kept me out of the backyard as they constructed the party set-up. As the late afternoon tinged the air gold, the power came on and the plumber showed up to give us running water, and I stepped into the yard into a fairytale. Clear lights were strung from every surface, candles waited in jars tucked among wildflowers, and a vintage trunk from my basement had been repurposed as a bourbon bar. For the first time all day I smiled. And I didn’t stop.

My friends started arriving a little later, all anxious to see the house I’d been working on for months. Though it wasn’t nearly as ready as I’d hoped it would be, their excitement was clear. As twilight fell the DJ (a new neighbor) set up, the candles glimmered, and the Kentucky bourbon flowed. We danced,

we talked non-stop, we hugged, we laughed, and as I danced with my husband under the stars to Detroit folk singer Rodriguez, I realized that this party was exactly – no, better – than I even imagined it would be.

And it wasn’t just the festive décor and the fairy lights. It was the simple conviction that everyone here was having a good time. I wasn’t worried what anyone thought about the state of the house renovation, or whether my outfit was ok, or that I didn’t have the perfect local beer. Nobody cared about that – they were all here to celebrate this birthday and this adventure in Detroit, and I could feel the love and joy from my friends warming my heart as surely as the bourbon was warming my soul.

After a full day of exploring the city the next day, we headed to a jazz lounge on 8 Mile where we fell on plates of soul food and leaned in to marvel at the saxophone player. I looked around at my friends’ bright faces and felt my own smile grow to echo theirs. “If this is 40,” I thought, “what was I waiting for? This is awesome!”

With the months leading up to this changing of decades consumed by work on the house, I’d given little thought to turning 40. Now, as I reflected how amazing it felt to have the confidence that comes with years, the surety that my friends would support me no matter what crazy adventure I embarked on, and the realization that there was nowhere I’d rather be and nothing I’d rather be doing than enjoying this night with my husband and friends, I smiled even more, nodding my head with satisfaction.

This is 40. And I’m only getting started.