



## The Cupcake Effect

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THE "CUPCAKE EFFECT" is a phenomenon we discovered in the Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall. A year ago, one of the minors in Juvenile Hall signed up for "sick call" (a request for medical evaluation) on two consecutive weeks. He wanted to be seen in order to make sure everyone knew that his birthday was approaching.

"Can I just have a piece of cake? Please! This will be my second birthday in Juvenile Hall. I just want a piece of cake," he said. He started asking for that piece of cake a couple of months prior to his birthday.

Finally, one of the nurses called the kitchen and requested a piece of cake for him on his birthday. He had a smile on his face from ear to ear all day long!

Consequently, the medical staff decided to honor every minor's birthday. It was an amazingly moving experience for all of us.

On a minor's birthday, a dayshift nurse would call the unit to have the minor come to the clinic. The minor has no idea why he or she was being called to the clinic. The medical staff would welcome the minor by singing "Happy Birthday," while presenting a cupcake with a single birthday candle. This usually generated a lot of joy and non-stop laughter in the clinic.

One day, the medical staff called a birthday boy to the clinic as usual. This boy was well built at 6 feet, 180 lbs, and walked into the clinic with tattoos and needle tracks all over his arms. He projected an attitude right from the beginning, and said, "Why did you call me? What do you want from me?"

We answered with a coordinated melody of Happy Birthday. All of a sudden, his face turned soft, white, and then, he burst into tears. He tried to catch his breath, but was speechless. We all felt the air freeze and time stop. One could see his heart melt. He was so touched that he could not stop crying. He was not even able to eat his cupcake! We wiped the tears from our own eyes and realized "This is what we are here for."

A changed boy went back to his unit after saying "thank you" with the best manners and the tenderest look I had ever seen.

One of the girls sobbed with tears when presented with happy birthday song. "I never had any birthday cake in my whole life! Why are you caring so much about me?"

Another boy said, "This is the first time someone ever remembered my birthday!"

The smallest caring action combined with a little human touch warmed their lonely hearts. A few sincere words can open the book of their life stories.

Some have parents locked up in jail; or drunken parents incapable of parenthood whose child's birthday was never of importance. A few have separated parents, each assuming the other will celebrate their child's birthday. Some are always in between foster homes, without a long enough stay for a birthday celebration.

A couple of minors said that they were going to have a birthday party when their mom gets her next pay check, but that precious pay check never came,

I call it the "cupcake effect." A little kindness, support, caring, and a human touch; an act that states, "you are recognized, you are someone special, and you matter," brings out the best within a child. It is hope.

The nursing staff began to notice better manners and bright hopeful eyes at medication time. Often we would be greeted with, "Nurse, can you please check to see if my name is in your book for a cupcake? My birthday is coming up in four days."

In the Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall, there are some teens with tough shells and poor manners. There are also well-behaved ones who made mistakes in the past. Bad or not, they all have a gentle, well-mannered, and sincere child within. The birthday wishes, supplemented with delicious cupcakes have a tendency to break down these defensive walls. As a result, outlook and manners begin to change for the better.

The simple recognition and acknowledgement of a birthday can have immense impact on their attitude towards life and towards their fellow citizens. Ultimately, the "cupcake effect" changed us all.

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