



“This Was a Great Birthday”: The Power of Being Seen

Birthdays are usually days of joy—anticipated celebrations filled with cake, gifts, and good wishes. But for many young people living in group homes, birthdays often carry a different weight. For some, they are reminders of disappointment, of being overlooked, of feeling forgotten.

Earlier this year, one resident shared that his birthdays had always felt that way. His memories brought only frustration and sadness, summed up in his words: “I get forgotten every year.” When asked what he might like as a gift, his pain came through in a sharp reply: “NOTHING!” Pressed again, he finally muttered, “Doritos. The Sriracha ones.” Then he walked away, shoulders heavy with the expectation of yet another birthday passing him by.

But this time was different. A staff member shared the conversation with colleagues, and together they came up with a simple but powerful idea: what if every adult he encountered on his birthday gave him Doritos? Not just one bag, but many—an unmistakable reminder that he was heard. Teachers, behavior coaches, counselors, group home staff—even those who didn’t work directly with him—joined in.



When his birthday arrived, he looked sharp in his new outfit, a small statement of his own resilience. Throughout the day, bag after bag of Doritos appeared in his hands—small ones, large ones, all the right flavor. At school. At the Home. Even during a “clinic visit,” where staff had staged a hallway surprise just for him. By the time he returned to his group home that evening, he was laughing, crying, hugging the staff around him.

“This was a great birthday,” he said with tears in his eyes. And it was.

Because in that moment, he wasn’t forgotten. He wasn’t invisible. **He was seen.**