

My Unintentional Mentors

I was sitting among 400 kids who had arrived from villages near and far to attend our seven-day camp in Tamale, Ghana. I heard a faint whisper as Terrence leaned into me, "Is that an American cookie in your hand?". I had snuck up to my room to grab a snack from my suitcase since the guineafowl they served for lunch did not seem to satisfy my hunger. I secretly slid a cookie in Terrence's hand and instead of popping into his mouth, he began to break it into pieces to share with his friends. Terrence was the first unintentional mentor in my life showing me that even a small gesture can brighten a child's day.

I was attending this trip to Ghana at just 13-yr old because I felt like I needed to do something "big" to make a difference in the world. I am from a family who doesn't shy away from jumping into things to change the course in people's lives. My older brother has been to Nicaragua many times to help build a community and construct a feeding center after a devastating hurricane hit the East Coast. My aunt spent a year in Taiwan teaching English, my grandparents spent countless hours caring for AIDS patients here in the USA and my parents adopted my two younger sisters from China. But on that hot humid day in Ghana, I saw a small boy give what he had to others in need and it sent a circle of smiles around the group of boys huddled together.

At the end of the camp, many of the kids had spent hours weaving bracelets for me to wear to remember our time together. I was amazed at the design ability these young girls had and the willingness to take the time to make me a gift. I was also struck by the God-given talent these kids possessed and realized the only difference between me and these kids was the opportunity I have in the States to use my gifts to reach more people in need.

When I returned home I started searching online for charities that could use a custom cake. I had recently started making cakes for my friends for their birthday and enjoyed designing them to match a theme or their personality. I knew I could use my talent to make a child's birthday exciting, even it was adding happiness and love for just one special day. I contacted the non-profit, Birthday Cakes for Free, based in Santa Cruz, CA and they helped me start my own chapter, Birthday Cakes for Free in Loudoun County, VA. At first, I made a few cakes for local Silent Auctions and donated themed cupcakes to a Title 1 school in Sterling for all of their

events celebrating the success of their students. I knew there were more kids in need in the area and called my local church requesting ideas on how I could find kids who could benefit from my service. They suggested I call Sharon Brown, the founder of Birthday Blessings, Inc. I met with her in May 2012 and we immediately had the same vision to make sure every child knows they are special, loved and important. Ms. Brown encouraged me to build partnerships with those who may not have the talent but want to join in my vision with monetary or supply donations. I was reluctant to talk to a group at first, but after creating my Facebook Page, it opened up more opportunities to discuss my dream to reach more kids. Ms. Brown and I have been contacted by charities and individuals in need and I have provided over 300 birthday cakes from 2012-2016.

I have met many people along the way who have encouraged me but one of my favorite stories is about meeting Angie Ivey. Ms. Ivey saw my Facebook page and contacted me to see if she could bake a cake for a child in Loudoun County. I was reluctant to accept her request since I did not know where in Loudoun County she resided and I did not want to drive too far to pick up a cake even though it was a wonderful gesture. We both had a good laugh when we found out we lived around the corner from each other. Ms. Ivey had owned her own bakery in Oregon and had recently moved to the area and wanted to give of her talents to others. Over the next few months she gave me decorating advice, helped with the cake baking and designs and donated supplies to me. It wasn't until she was about to move to Texas that she confided in me her deep hurt. She had lost a teenage daughter to cancer. Her daughter was diagnosed the week before her freshman year and died one month before graduation. Ms. Ivey became a mentor in my life by showing me that even in the storms of our lives, there is still room to find others in need of our gifts and talents. Even though she has moved many states away, we still stay in touch and she will often send me recipes or design ideas.

I have found in serving others, it not only encouraged the kids but it has encouraged me. I know that I have contributed to helping them in their search for self-worth and I have learned that I do not have to go overseas, or raise an enormous amount of money or attend some sophisticated training to change the course of someone's life. I am blessed to have many mentors meander through my life and touch my heart when I was not even out looking for them. I hope to continue to use my gifts to transform the hearts of those in need as I enter adulthood and hopefully mentor others along my path.