

The Cupcake Lady

Maria Wassef's sweet treats bring joy to the homeless.

By Candace Rotolo

How did you celebrate your last birthday? Dinner with loved ones? An exciting trip? While some of us might like to forget how old we are or even fib about our age, our birthday is still a day to celebrate.

For the homeless, it's often a day that goes by unrecognized. Maria Wassef has made it her mission to change that.

On a Monday evening at St. Matthew's House, after the homeless residents gathered for dinner and their weekly meeting, Wassef helped pass out cupcakes to four residents, while the crowd sang Happy Birthday.

"Most of the time, people at the shelter come and go," explains St. Matthew's senior case manager Candy Yeung. "Their birthdays don't get recognized. It means a lot to them that someone knows them by name, remembers their birthday and celebrates it in a public manner."

That's the reason Wassef, a Naples hairdresser, started her cupcake charity about a year and a half ago.

Wassef has always had a soft spot for the less fortunate. For years, she and her family have made plates filled with Thanksgiving leftovers and distributed them to the homeless in Gainesville, where they spend the holiday. "It's a pleasure to see them eat a warm meal," she says.

"One day I woke up and wondered whether the homeless celebrate their birthday."

With the downturn in the economy, this empty-nest mother of two knew there were even more individuals and families in need of help and good cheer. Wassef and her clients started bringing homemade birthday cakes to the shelter at St. Matthew's so that residents there could have a celebration each week, but because of health regulations, workers asked for store-bought items. Wassef thought cupcakes would be a less expensive option and Maria's Birthday Wishes for the Homeless was born.

Word of Wassef's program spread, and today she supplies cupcakes to a total of 70 homeless shelters in Florida — from Pensacola to Key West — and in four other states. About a dozen other shelters are on a waiting list.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought it would spread," she says modestly. "I just saw a need."

Wassef believes in the power of this small, but simple gesture.

"Having a birthday means you exist," she states passionately. "I want (homeless) people to know we remember them and celebrate them as human beings."

Four Naples cupcake shops donate a large portion of the sweet treats, and UPS provides discounted shipping.





Maria and husband, Max, celebrate their wedding in 1984.

Son, David, was the matchmaker who brought his mother and Max together.



A PRIVILEGED UPRISING

Wassef's upbringing in South America was one of privilege, with maids, chauffeurs and other luxuries. Born and raised in Lima, Peru, she and her older sister attended an all-girl Catholic school. The daughter of an American-educated civil engineer, Wassef moved to Virginia at age 18 to go to college. Instead, she met her husband, married and gave birth to her oldest son, David, who's now 35 and lives in Gainesville. Although she's never suffered like the shelter residents she helps, Wassef struggled financially when she first moved to America, and was determined to live independent of her parent's resources.

"It's taught me both ways," she says in her accented English.

When Wassef's marriage ended after 10 years, she eventually moved to Miami where her parents had relocated.

Content with being a good mother, Wassef had no desire to date. But her young son had other ideas; he asked a classmate's uncle, Max Wassef, to take his mom to a community dance. Embarrassed, Wassef called Max to politely decline the invitation. But her mother and son persisted until Wassef agreed to a date. Maria and Max married four months later and added son, Michael, to their family 24 years ago.

A job transfer brought the couple to Naples, where they've lived for 14 years. Max works for the Collier Health Department as a dental hygienist, while Maria opened her Mia Bella Secret salon five years ago.

AN EMPTY-NEST HOBBY

With her children grown, Wassef calls her cupcake charity "her baby" and admits that it has taken on a life of its own. Michael, her youngest son who's a college student and musician in California, helped her start up *Wishes for the Homeless* on the West Coast.

There are now five shelters in that state that receive cupcakes. Other clients or friends have done the same in other cities and states, or they help organize fundraisers to purchase cupcakes and pay for shipping. "It's not expensive and anyone can help," she says of her charity.

While Wassef gives much of the credit to her clients, calling them her "right hand," she personally spends hours each week communicating by email and phone to shelters, making sure they have the right amount of cupcakes each month to celebrate birthdays. From the back of her salon — Cupcake Central, so to speak — she packs up the donations and sends them off. Treats are personally delivered to 13 area shelters from Naples to Punta Gorda.

"It doesn't matter the time (I spend) because it's getting across. People see what I do and they want to help. I think if I were younger, I could do so much more. But God decided this was the right time."

Wassef has raffled off baskets and a few months ago participated in a popular Macy's event that donated a portion of purchases back to non-profit organizations. Everywhere she goes, Wassef says she constantly gets signs that this is the work she's supposed to be doing. She knows it when she meets a person living in a homeless shelter and they smile at the sight of getting a cupcake.

"A woman at one shelter told me no one wished her happy birthday for five years! How can that happen? We have to show people love. Maybe one day that will be the turning point for them."

During deliveries at St. Matthew's House, Wassef takes time to talk, or at least share a smile, with each cupcake recipient. "All of them have a story," she says of the people she meets. Not everyone is homeless because of addiction. Some residents are victims

of the economic downturn, proud people who never had to ask for help before, but lost their jobs and sometimes their homes.

Wassef encounters others who are affected by homelessness in a different way. While soliciting donations to raffle off as part of a fundraising basket, one store manager brought Wassef the most expensive car wash cleaning package for her to include. The manager explained that she hoped the event was successful so that her son, who was homeless, estranged and living in Sarasota, might receive the treat.

"We're not only touching the homeless," stresses Wassef.



Maria (right) and her older sister had a privileged childhood in Lima, Peru.

With the success of Birthday Wishes for the Homeless, Wassef wants to add soup kitchens to her delivery list, and hopes to one day take her charity national. She's written to well-known bakery companies, but so far, none of them have been able or willing to donate cupcakes to the cause. While Wassef is disappointed, she's undeterred. She

believes in miracles, and that there's a divine timeline for everything that happens in life.

"I've realized that I've lived 56 years and I've learned it's not what you have or can get. Happiness is about helping others and making a difference."

Maria Wassef is doing that and more — one cupcake at a time. *B*



(L-R) Max, Maria and sons Michael and David.