



"A 4FT, UNIFORMED WILLY WONKA, DOLING OUT DELICIOUS TREATS FOR SUSPICIOUSLY REASONABLE PRICES"

Pour your heart and soul into that talented, troubled student, by all means, says **Tom Starkey**. It's what we do. But life ain't like the movies...

In my second year of teaching at a fairly tough secondary I encountered Karl. His nonchalance and aptitude for achieving the sum total of absolutely bugger all had become somewhat legendary within the staffroom. Infuriatingly, the kid seemed to have been packed to the brim with a potential to do well in any academic area or endeavour that he put his mind to – but this was not where Karl's passions lay. Karl's passion was selling chocolate to his peers at low, low prices.

Where he got this chocolate I have no idea (although the fact that he had an older cousin who worked in quality assurance for a nearby well-known confectioner may have had something to do with it). In every class and corridor, if there was a student going without his daily sugar rush, Karl would be there; a 4ft uniformed Willy Wonka, doling out delicious treats for suspiciously reasonable prices.

The entrepreneurial spirit was strong in Karl, and the common consensus was that schoolwork was in no way a priority for this walking diabetes epidemic. However, this changed when we got talking after I nabbed him during a Kit-Kat Chunky deal that went sour. After trying to persuade me that I was looking a tad peaky and that perhaps a nice Curly-Wurly might perk me up a bit he sighed and looked utterly crestfallen.

"It's too late for me to get anything decent for English, isn't it Sir?" he said.

Karl was a little under halfway through Year 11 and was lagging behind in just about every subject, but English was the one where it was most apparent. The self-knowledge of his lack of prospects in this area was heart-breaking. It was there I promised myself that I would do everything in my power to help Karl turn things around.

What follows should be thought of in terms of a training montage. Think Rocky but with less punching and more essays. CUE THE 80s ROCK BALLAD!

** Extra sessions after school and during lunchtime. Karl hesitant at first and then more and more enthused as he realises his own aptitude.*

** Cut to deals done and promises made with some seriously intimidating staff regarding coursework deadlines and other help.*

** Close-up of me throwing a holdall of Twix bars into a filing cabinet and locking the door under much protestation from Karl.*

** Karl sitting at a desk sweating and crumpling paper as he struggles with an essay.*

** Me opening the filing cabinet, offering Karl the bag and Karl refusing to take it. Me nodding sagely after he has left the room.*

** Extreme close-up of an 'A' at the top of Karl's essay paper. High-fives and smiles all round. Guitar solo. Fade to black.*

Over the weeks and months I went above and beyond helping Karl. I invested a lot of hours and effort into going the extra mile. Come exam day I had high hopes. I'd put in the work, he'd put in the work.

Everything was going to be alright.

Then Karl didn't turn up.

I found him in in the playing field presiding over a bidding war for a box of king-size Snickers. I asked him why he didn't go to the exam.

"Didn't really feel like it," he said. "I can always re-take anyway." He then went back to the business at hand leaving me utterly dumbstruck.

I was extremely angry for the longest time. I'd done everything in my power to help Karl succeed and he hadn't so much fallen at the last hurdle as decided to have a nice sit down and a cup of tea instead. I felt cheated. I'd put in the effort, my reward should have been his academic success. That's how it works, right? You get out what you put in. It's only fair.

But this job isn't fair. Cause doesn't always lead to effect, because we deal with people. And people are imperfect. The young ones more than others. Brilliant, yes, but imperfect all the same. We can try to guide them away from making huge mistakes, but sometimes they still make them. Some are even dead set on it. With people there are no guarantees and you shouldn't look for any as that way lies madness.

This job is not about seeking appropriate recompense for our efforts (although there is correlation between what you put in and what you get out). It's about doing our very utmost, sweating and toiling to give those that we teach a chance to succeed on their own. Often they take that chance and soar. Sometimes they don't.

Just like real people.

I met Karl a couple of years later. He was doing a vocational course in college. He thanked me for my efforts and assured me that there was nothing else I could have done.

"I had my priorities all messed up," he said. "It just wasn't something that seemed important on the day". I asked him what course he was doing. "Business Management," he said with a wink. He put something down on the table and walked away.

It was a Mars Bar.

Thanks for reading.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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