

Infrequent observation

Leap Year birthdays *officially* occur once every four years

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Let's face it, some birthdays are more intriguing than others. New Year's Day, Christmas, Valentine's Day and Halloween birthdays all invite comments and questions.

But leap year babies have it over everybody else when it comes to unusual birthdays. For people born on February 29—that extra day tacked onto the

end of the year's shortest month every four years—this is a party year.

"They think it's the coolest thing," Diana Greco said of her twin daughters, Emma and Sophia Slaughter, born on Feb. 29, 2008.

The girls will celebrate their third official birthday this Saturday. Greco said the family always celebrates the twins' birthday, but they go big during leap years—say, a skating rink

party with lots of friends.

Sophia and Emma are students at Locust Grove Middle School. Their proud mom said they enjoy their unusual status as twins, and being leap year babies makes it even better, because "they know that they're not that many kids out there with leap year birthdays."

Greco's father's birthday is February 28. When it's not a leap

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Leap Year twin sisters Sophia and Emma Slaughter are either 3 years old or 12 years old, depending on how you look at it.

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year, the twins celebrate with their grandfather on his special day. But when February 29 rolls around, she said, "We have a lot of fun with it." She said the girls can expect cards congratulating them on turning 3.

In case you've forgotten how this all works, a leap day is slotted into the Gregorian calendar every four years so it can catch up with the length of time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun. Our lovely planet needs 365 days, plus a quarter day, before it passes "Go" and starts all over again. The full day added at the end of February every four years straightens things out. (Astronomers will tell you, however, there are exceptions to the rule. The year 1900 was not a leap year, for example, but 2000 was, all in the name of orb-circling precision.)

Sarah Melson Flint is another local leap year baby. The youthful mother of five will soon turn 8—or some would say 32.

Flint grew up in Unionville, graduated from Orange County High School in 2006 and now lives in Culpeper. As a little girl, she wasn't wild about having a leap year birthday, but when she turned 13 and celebrated with a group of her middle school friends at Chuck E. Cheese, she happened to meet an "older lady" there who was turning 12 in leap years. The two had a moment of bonding, and Flint began to realize her birthday was cool: "I like it now."

A leap year birthday makes for interesting conversations with new acquaintances, Flint said, and "of course, my kids get a kick out of it as well."

She and her husband have a 12-year-old girl, 9-year-old twin boys, a five-year-old boy and a two-year-old boy.

Going by the calendar alone, "I'm younger than three of my children," she said, adding that her children will ask her, "Mom, are you going to have a birthday this year?"

In joking conversations with them, she said she tells them, "I'm going to be forever young!"

When she was growing up, Flint celebrated her birthday during off years on both February 28 and March 1, thanks to her indulgent mother. Her husband, she said, didn't really have the option of ending that tradition: "You can't stop it now!" she said with a laugh.

This year, her husband took the week off from work so they could "spend the whole week doing family things." She said they'll probably go on a hike, go out for dinner and take the children to a trampoline park.

Jeff Butler of Unionville, a Rapidan volunteer firefighter, is looking forward to his 14th (or 56th) birthday on Saturday.

As a boy, he celebrated his birthday with a cousin also born on February 29, just six hours after he was born. "We always celebrated together until we got out of school—celebrated every one of them together," he said.

Being born on February 29 has a "special side to it; it's unique," Butler said. It's so special, in fact, that he runs into a lot of people who have no idea what he's talking about.

"A whole lot of adults don't understand it at all. These are grown adults!" he said, a touch of wonder in his voice.

But he realizes leap year is not a typical thing: "It took me a while to understand it myself. It is what it is."

When it's not a leap year, he marks the day in February "because that's when I was born, not in March."

This year, his wife gave him a litter of beagle puppies as an early birthday present. Butler said he'd had little sleep the night before a phone interview about his leap year birthday because he'd been busy tending to the pups. But no matter—he is thrilled with the little dogs that have put a tail-wagging leap in his special year.

Elsewhere in the county, off Mountain Track Road, Tim Neale is gearing up for his 16th birthday—make that 64th, if you insist.

His grandfather also was a leap year baby, and Neale said leap year babies tend to connect with each other on the topic.

He has his own way of dealing with off years. "When you're young, you celebrate your birthday on February 28th. When you're old, you celebrate on March 1—you put it off as long as possible."

The shifting birthday can be "a pain in the neck for your family, because they don't know when to celebrate your birthday. You also have to watch out because it could well be a surprise party for you when it's your real birthday," he said.

He said there was a time when he would get asked his birth date for a survey or some official business, and computerized forms would not accept February 29 as a legitimate birthday. But that "hiccup" has gone away.

This Saturday, he and his wife have dinner plans. "And then I'm going to a party that's not supposed to be for me, but I'll be looking over my shoulder to make sure it's not a surprise," he said.

Neale may look before he leaps into party mode, but he sounded like he wouldn't mind the attention. Break out the lemonade for this brand-new 16-year-old!