

ESSENTIALLY PITTSBURGH

Tales from the other side of the cash register

By Barbara Klein

I've been called many things in my 30-some years, but this is the first time I've ever answered to the rank of "seasonal temp." It's not so bad. After all, seasonal can be interpreted as festive, and temp — well, when you get right down to it, we're all temps on this earth.

My personal pilgrimage in search of new life experiences began a couple of months ago. That's when a reputable retail establishment of enormous proportions — aka Borders — heeded my request for peace on earth, extra cash in pocket. I was quickly taken into the fold and told I'd be stationed, along with a dozen or so other raw recruits, in the trenches. The Cash Registers.

Now, I've operated many machines (computers, cars, microwaves) in my life, but this is the first time I've ever encountered the likes of this particular contraption. And for a few moments, at least, I was fearless.

I arrived as scheduled for my introductory course in cash-register management only to discover that my fellow classmates ranged in age from 17 to 19, and that the instructor was barely legal herself. After sharing brief introductions — their worlds revolved around homework, mine around mortgage payments — we got to work.

"Remember," our leader informed us, "the register is smarter than you." Thanks a lot. "And in most cases it will tell you what to do — but there are exceptions." Returns, special orders, special discounts, tax exemptions, house charges, the list was long, and my attention was growing short. How hard could this be, I reasoned, when they're hiring babies? I felt confident that as a capable, functional adult I'd be able to figure things out when the time came.

And soon enough, it was time. Less than 24 hours later I found myself standing on the front lines of customer service, wishing I had paid a little more attention in class. At this point all I had going for me was good will and the most profound hopes that everyone would pay cash for their purchases and refrain from making any returns until well after the new year.

My hopes, however, were quickly pulverized. I was confronted with an innocent-looking grandmother who wanted to return some errant merchandise and then buy her sweet, unassuming grandchildren something special. And how did she propose to pay for these items? She had designs on using a gift certificate and writing a check for the balance. Oh, it was like some Dickens novel run amok. God bless us all, I thought, as I tried to make the transaction.

Soon the line started stacking up behind her. I could see the fidgeting and foot shifting. I could hear the moans of impatience. The crowd was getting ugly, and I was fast approaching hysteria. I'd hit a button, and the machine would beep, mocking me.

Finally, I had no choice. I cried, "Manager!" And as if by some miracle, this angel of mercy



Counter culture

Stacy Innerst/Post-Gazette

appeared at my side. In a couple of deft strokes, she had the woman out the door and the next customer frowning in front of me.

"That was really crazy," I remarked to my rescuer, a woman who had obviously weathered more than her share of holiday storms. "Honey, you ain't seen nothing yet," she said. "Just wait."

"Wait for what?" I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Wait until after Thanksgiving," she replied. I could still hear her maniacal laugh resounding off the well-stocked shelves as I turned to the next person and said with less conviction than most politicians, "May I help you?"

And then, at last, my shift was over. Exhausted in both body and spirit, I limped to the exit. My young colleagues hurried past me. "Hey, this was really fun," they shouted gleefully. Kids today.

Then, the hordes really descended.

(I say this in defiance of the employee handbook, which on Page 57 clearly states that customers should never be referred to as hordes or swarming plagues of locusts.)

It was Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, the day the aforementioned hordes traditionally descend. Nothing in my life had prepared me for this event. Nothing could.

The cheerful strains of "Joy to the World" lingering in the background served as a strange counterpoint to the less-than-cheerful demeanor of the majority of holiday shoppers. I guess sitting in traffic, standing in line and then spending inordinate sums of money will do that to even the most blithe of spirits.

But I must admit, my spirit was none too jubilant either. The store was like the Titanic, and my register was one of the few lifeboats in this ocean of humanity. Parents with screaming children, teen-agers with screaming hormones, people of all shapes, sizes and credit limits were looking for refuge. They were looking to me.

By my count, I said 4,259 "thank yous," but only about 3,000 of those were sincere. I swiped 2,500 credit cards, inspected 1,000 drivers licenses and handled more cash than my bank account has or ever will see.

But none of that can ever compare to the gut-wrenching terror that gripped me when a customer would ask: "Could you wrap this?" Truth be told, I don't believe in wrapping. Isn't that why bags were invented, to spare us the humiliation of trying to join paper, bows and tape together in perfect harmony? Being in customer service, however, I dutifully did my best. It's just that I simply can't perform under this kind of pressure.

And the pressure keeps building and building. Thankfully, the end is near. In fact, it's only two shopping days away. Until that fateful day arrives, however, rest assured that my comrades and I will continue to person our registers.

Something else has occurred. Something truly wondrous.

Somewhere between then and now, we — the seasonal temps — have been transformed into a mean fighting machine. We can maneuver through the most complicated transactions — one-handed. We can bag, scan and demagnetize in a single, fluid motion.

And yet sadly, I don't think these skills will find a place in my other life. My real life. Although I won't be sorry to turn in my badge, I have no regrets. The people I've served with have inspired me. They all have their stories to tell. They're students and artists, underemployed Ph.D.'s and fledgling entrepreneurs. And they all share one goal — to be standing on the other side of the counter next year.

So please, be kind to your checkout person in what's left of this holiday season, and she will be kind to you.

Barbara Klein is a Pittsburgh free-lance writer.