

## Sometimes Charity Begins at the Office

Something happened to me recently that has been bugging me, so I figure it may as well bug you, too.

I work in a business that has walk-in customers. My job description no longer includes waiting on them - fortunately for all concerned - but if enough employees are missing or busy for one reason or another, I'll jump up from my desk to help out.

My product knowledge has deteriorated to the point that I'm more or less useless on the sales floor, so I'll usually stall customers until I can locate someone smart who invariably says with surprise, "You actually are helping a customer?" To which I'll reply in mock horror, "Yes, it's *awful!*"

Such was the case a couple of weeks ago when I seemed to be the only one available and a woman who appeared to be in her low thirties walked in the door. She was dressed in older-style clothes in good shape (think Goodwill), and as I started to greet her, she interrupted me.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm not here to buy anything. I just got into town with my two young children and I'm looking for work." I noticed her eyes were bloodshot and beginning to well up with tears. "My husband is in the hospital here with prostate cancer and I need a place to stay but I have only seventeen dollars. Do you have any windows or floors that need cleaning? I'll do anything."

After hesitating for a moment, I said, "Hold on." I walked over to my desk a short distance away and came back with a \$50 bill which I handed to her. I said, "I don't really have anything for you to do, but I'm happy to be able to help out someone like you every now and then." I touched her on the shoulder and said, "Please take this, and I hope things get better for you soon." She tearfully thanked me, hugged me, and ran out the door.

After I sat back down at my desk, I couldn't help thinking about how insulated I usually am from this type of real-life distress and how I had missed a chance to make more of a difference. I looked out the window just in time to see her entering the motel office across the street, so I waited five minutes, called their front desk and worked out a deal to pay for her room anonymously for a week if she chose to stay that long.

I was feeling pretty good about myself for about two minutes until I started thinking about how scenarios like this must play out dozens if not hundreds of times per day in our community – all of which are invisible to me.

If I volunteered for a day at the Shelter House, Crisis Center or Ronald McDonald House, I'm sure I'd be emotionally overwhelmed. Like many (if not most) of you, I write checks every year to the United Way and directly to some of the same agencies and other charities as well, but it's all rather detached and impersonal compared to giving cash to someone who walks in my door and hugs me.

The flip side of this feel-good experience is that I can't be 100% confident that the need was legitimate. Similarly, when I give \$10 to occasional street people holding hand-lettered HOMELESS, PLEASE HELP signs, I assume that a certain (hopefully low) percentage of them are scamming me.

I told this story to a friend who said that a few years ago she had given some money to a panhandler working a busy street corner and later mentioned it to her husband. He said, "Yes, I know who you're talking about. When he's done for the day, he gets into his Suburban and drives over to a strip club."

Even if all panhandlers were truly destitute, by giving them cash I'm told that I'm circumventing a proven social support system. We all arguably would have been better served had I directed them to an appropriate charitable organization that could help them solve their problems, and then make a donation directly to it instead.

Having completely overthought this experience, I'm still not sure what the takeaway is. I suppose I should probably donate more to recognized charities and

less to the random seemingly needy. Not to mention endeavoring to wait on fewer customers.

*Writers Group member Dave Parsons is increasingly harder to coax out of his office at the business he co-owns on the Coralville strip.*