

When I accepted a position as a cashier at a grocery store in 2016, I never had a thought I'd be working in a pandemic. None the horror stories from retail workers online did not include stories of working during a pandemic, mostly because COVID-19 was the first major global pandemic we have had to deal with. I was alive and probably did contract swine flu back in 2009, but life still felt normal and I went back to school as soon as I was fine. But COVID-19? It was very different.

When the news start talking about COVID-19, it felt so isolated in China. It did not take long for flights to slowly start being cancelled out of China in an attempt to contain the virus. For February reading week, one of my coworkers had planned to go down California to visit his snowbird parents and have his girlfriend fly from Shanghai to spend the week them. Sadly, she was not allowed out of the country and about a month later his parents would be forced back to Canada.

I still remember the week COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. It was my birthday week. Niantic had PokemonGO community day planned on my birthday, despite slowly cancelling the e-event in hotspots for the virus. I had planned to buy a cake to share with a bunch of strangers just for the sake of celebrating. My Calculus II midterm was scheduled for Friday, March 13<sup>th</sup> at 7:30PM. The class coordinated assured us that since COVID-19 was not yet in Saskatchewan and not a threat that the final would go as planned. It is a notoriously hard course and I spent all week studying for. I stayed in Murraby library from 6PM to past midnight both the Wednesday and Thursday to study for this exam despite it being worth only 15% of my grade. That Thursday was the last time I was on the USask campus before it closed its buildings. But then there were 2 presumptive cases in Saskatchewan. The next morning just before 10AM, on the day of this 7:30 PM midterm we were all assured was fine to continue was cancelled and the weight would be moved to our final, making the final worth 70% of the final grade. Over the weekend, the university decided that they would be suspending classes from March 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> to be moving them online for the remainder of the term, as they were closing the buildings on campus to nothing more than essential services.

Niantic cancelled community day, I had to cancel the cake I ordered and pretty much most of the plans I had made to celebrate my birthday.

I knew the day after getting the e-mail that my midterm was cancelled that I was going to be the first cashier on for the grocery store I worked at. Now, I work out in the suburbs of Saskatoon. We are the only grocery store in that city, and we are normally quite busy and one of the top stores with sales despite our store being much smaller than the main stores in Saskatoon. At this point, I had seen so many news stories and jokes online about people buying out toilet paper from stores. I had no idea what I was going into other than knowing I was going to be going into pure chaos.

At this point, they were having the first cashier come on at 8:30AM, despite the store opening at 8 because that first half hour is normally so quiet that the supervisor can handle it alone. That was far from what I walked in on. I walked into our cash office, grabbed my tray of

cash and looked down at it. I ask the person who was doing the morning paperwork of the previous days sales that if it was even worth counting to make sure I had the correct amount in my float. She had told me no and to just go out on the floor. And I did. The next cashier started at 9AM. I checked my sales when she got on and within that half hour of being the only cashier on, I had already made it to over \$3000. The entire day was a blur of large orders and long lines with no breaks between customers. I saw so many regulars that I did not even have time to have small talk with as there were so many more customers behind them.

Being a cashier isn't even a physically demanding job. Usually if I'm in pain from the job it's because my shoes are bad, or I went on vacation and was used of standing for 8 hours in a day. But this day was I was sweating. I have never sweat like I have in my 3.5 years on the job like I did those first few weeks. The movement was so constant.

To put the next number in perspective, on a busy day leading up to the long weekend in the summer or basically any weekend in the school year or the week before Christmas, on a busy day, I had never broken \$15,000 in sales in an eight-hour shift. By the time I went off till around 4 that day as there was enough relief on to fill up all our registers, I was just short of \$20,000 in sales.

Even in our busiest days leading up until Christmas, we never passed \$80,000 in grocery sales in a day (not including meat, deli, bakery and produce). That Friday I did not work, they had over \$140,000 in grocery sales. We would stay about \$100,000 a day for about 2 weeks. While these numbers would normally excite upper management, I could see the stress showing from the store manager. Despite working in the company for over 30 years at this point, this was a first for her too. No one knew what was going to happen or how to handle it.

Supply chain management did not know how to handle it. Cleaning supplies, yeast, rice, flour and pizza kits were some of the main things we could not get in for a long while. Toilet paper was coming in as it was going out. There were empty spots on our shelves for weeks. Pasta, soup, sugar and so many others were just empty shelves for a couple of weeks.

One of the things many retail workers dread if the customers. They are what can actually make the job a living hell. However, the internet really pushed towards a "they have no choice but to be there to serve you to make ends meet so please be thankful for them as they put their lives on the line so you can have food to eat" which did show. A bunch of customers were so much for thankful than before COVID. It did make the job more barrable during this. However, the ones who were crazy were crazier than usual.

Even hearing some of the stories from my customers were too much sometimes. In the beginning, I had a lady tell me she just got off a plane from Atlanta and was stopping to get some things before self-isolating as soon as she got home. Of course, it would be the next day that the Government of Saskatchewan would implement the fine for breaking quarantine. I am not even sure what kind of response she was expecting because all my internal dialogue wanted me to yell at her, call her an idiot and ask her if my life meant that little to her that she

could not possibly have gotten anyone else get groceries for her. I already saw so many people already coming in and making multiple orders. One being their personal one, or another for a parent or child coming back from a trip who is requiring to self-isolate and them getting their groceries.

That first week I had a fully-grown woman crying in front of me. It was a cry of relief and distress. She was picking up her groceries for the final time before picking up her daughter from airport. Her daughter was coming back early from a mission in South East Asia, but her daughter was lucky. There were other people there who were not going to be coming home for a while longer due to cancelation of many flights. I wish I could have consoled her other than being like "I'm sorry to hear, but I'm happy for you to be getting her back."

There were several people who came through my till who had welcomed a new member to the family. The first I talked to would be a lady who was out for the first time a few weeks. She said she had a newborn, her 4<sup>th</sup> boy. She said he will always have the wildest of her children. His birth story was that because of COVID19, the hospital to try keep mom and baby safe that they are kicked out of the hospital in less than 24 hours. The only family allowed to visit are the parents too, so even the dad could not switch out with his parents or his in-laws to allow them to meet their newest grandson. I had a few grandparents who were not able to meet their newest, and sometimes first grandchild. I could see the pain in their eyes. The only ways they can meet them is in driveway visits, but they know it's best for the baby.

We know we're lucky to still have a job, considering many of our customers have lost theirs. There are business owners who had to lay off all their employees and self-employed individuals who were suddenly without out. Bu the "Hero Pay" we got, while short-lived, had a weird feeling to it. While I understand where they're coming from, I wish I got other appreciation from the company too. I did not feel like they could possibly put a price on our health.

Early on, we got the protective class shield for us. They are slightly overkill as not only do they protect us, they're also thick enough to be bulletproof. Another thing the company did to add protection to us is that we had to close down some tills so we could only have every other one open. If we were to have two next to each other open, the back of one cashier would not be able to be a safe distance away. This brought us down from a total of 7 tills to 3. Even as things slowed down, we still, by the time I'm writing this in June, have the same sales we normally do. Having half the number of tills but similar sales is just one of the many things causing stress to myself and coworkers.

I was eventually able to celebrate my birthday 3 months late with my friends as things started opening up. By the end of June, I can see the wear in my coworkers and feel it in myself. People are suffering from migraines more often; we're all snapping out of anger more. I have growing apathy towards the world. The customers are starting to showcase it more too. While things open up around Saskatchewan, we still have the same rules since April. And despite us having the same rules since March, a few seem to think they're too much and think it is our

doing. Some of them look like we just told them we fucked their mom when we ask them to please take a step away from us. We hope one day we can go back to normalcy so we can have a less pressure on what used to be an easy-going job.