

wrong number

LaRosa's trains their operators to be nice and get it right. But what happens when Panty Man calls?

One month after my 16th birthday, I took my first job, working at LaRosa's Phone Center, the place that takes carryout and delivery orders for all 50 of the chain's locations. Call 347-1111 and you can get pizza delivered anywhere in the Greater Cincinnati area. Or, if you're a certain kind of customer, you can call and become an urban legend.

Taking phone orders is a pretty good job for a high school or college student—the managers are cool, and it's much easier than flipping burgers. The motto at the phone center is "be nice and get it right," and for the most part, operators take

this to heart. Because of the service, and because the phone number is so easy to remember, LaRosa's has cornered the local pizza business. (The company's record is 18,000 orders on a Friday night.)

In the time I was there I took thousands of calls and dealt with a variety of—how to say this?—interesting people.

I learned a lot about human nature. One customer in particular taught me some things about human nature that I wouldn't have picked up in high school: the caller known only as Panty Man.

I was at the phone center for about a month when I first heard about Panty Man. I was waiting for my ride home one night, and another operator was waiting with me, so I decided to strike up a conversation.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"About a year and a half," she replied. "What about you?"

"Just a month," I said.

All phone center small talk. Then she asked, "Have you heard from Panty Man?"

I was caught off guard. Was this one of the managers? A nickname for an eccentric customer? "Who's Panty Man?"

"He's a guy who calls here and if he gets a female operator he asks her what color panties she's wearing," she explained.

My ride came and the conversation ended there. I was a little weirded out, but then it dawned on me—she was trying to fool me. Panty Man was some inside joke that experienced staff told new operators to scare them. At this time, of course, my experience with the bizarre was very limited; I was attending Mother of Mercy High School in Westwood, the point of which was to protect me from such things. But while I was sheltered, I wasn't about to be thought of as gullible.

Weeks went by—no more mention of Panty Man, and I forgot about him. Then my friend Kerri started working at the phone center. One day in homeroom, she hit me with that question.

"Hey, do you know about Panty Man?" Kerri asked.

"Yeah, when I first started working there," I said, assuming the tone of a LaRosa's veteran. "It's just some story they tell newbies."

"No, it's not," Kerri said. "I talked to him before. He says, 'What color panties are you wearing?' in a really creepy voice."

Now, being a Mercy girl, Kerri wasn't about to make this up. But it really irritated me—in fact, I was a little jealous of the fact that she had only been there for a few weeks and had already encountered Panty Man, but I had been there for months and never heard a word. Secondhand information wasn't going to do. I wanted to hear from this guy myself.

Once I knew Panty Man was for real, I started thinking up ways to outsmart him. I was going to be the operator that got Panty Man to quit calling the phone center. In my head, I devised many clever comebacks that would stun him into silence:



Panty Man: "What color panties are you wearing?"

Me: "What color panties are you wearing?"

Or—

PM: "What color panties are you wearing?"

Me: "I'm not wearing any."

But months passed, and nothing. Every once in a while my coworkers got calls, and most of them just hung up on him. But me—it was always just another call for large pepperoni. Night after night. Then one night I was working a shift I don't usually work when the calls started flurrying. Just as I would finish one call the electronic bong would sound in my headset, letting me know I had another call. Over and over.

Bong. Another bong like all the others I had heard every night. I answered.

"Thank you for calling LaRosa's; my name is Missy. May I have your telephone number please?"

All I heard on the other end was mut-

tering. I tried in vain to decipher a phone number.

"I'm sorry, what did you say, sir?" I was sort of suspicious, but I had been trained to "be nice and get it right," and that didn't include hanging up on customers because they muttered.

"What color panties are you wearing?" The voice on the other end was low, annoying and vaguely disturbing, as if a wasp were buzzing around my ear, but my hands were too full to swat at it.

He didn't say anything more than that, and I don't think I listened for more than a few seconds. But in those few seconds, all the witty comebacks I had thought up hid way in the back of my head.

All I did was hang up.

You'd think I'd be elated: Finally I had heard from the legendary Panty Man! I was now a true, official LaRosa's phone center operator! I had heard it all! I couldn't wait to tell everyone, to be the storyteller instead of the listener.

But, in fact, I was disappointed—and

even a little ashamed of myself for anticipating hearing from—what? A crank caller? I'd been waiting to talk to a guy who had nothing better to do than harass teenage phone operators. He was no different than any other Bart Simpson wannabe who called on a regular basis. Well, maybe a little more perverse.

After that day, I dealt with Panty Man several times. I never bothered to answer his question, but I now see him for what he truly is—a pathetic and lonely man. I was eventually promoted to a customer service representative at the phone center, and I advised new operators—including some males—on how to deal with calls from the Panty Man. My advice to them? Hang up. Don't give him the satisfaction of hearing a reply, no matter how witty. But until you hear that distinctive muttering, it's your job to be nice and get it right. ♦

Melissa Booth is a recent graduate of the College of Mount St. Joseph.

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*Kathy Dietz
Ed Kramer, CR*