

Working For Cookies

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Adult volunteers reflect on the enormous job of the annual Girl Scout cookie sale

BY SHIRLEY GRACE, MA

The day: early in April. The time: just before noon. Susan Normand, head administrator for a high-tech consulting firm, hunches over her desk. "Oh, for God's sake," she mutters, stabbing at the Clear key on her calculator. Stacks of money surround the CPA, mostly one's and five's, plus an assortment of checks. She sighs and tosses the calculator aside, groaning, "What...a...*pain*." She rakes her fingers through raked-all-morning shoulder length brown hair. Reconciling the final cookie money deposit for her daughter's Girl Scout troop is driving her bonkers. It has to be in the bank *today*, or she'll be getting the big eyes from GSCNC, the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital. Her troop's number will go on the delinquent account list. Any troop on this list is precluded from selling cookies next year until they pay up.

Normand, a troop co-leader for Junior Troop 2355 in Lanham, Maryland, is the Troop Cookie Manager — that's TCM in scout-speak — for both Junior Troop 2355 and Brownie Troop 3056. She says she understands that selling Girl Scout cookies is a tradition, and that the troops sell them to make money. Between the two

troops, they hauled in a net profit of more than \$1,300. But after three months of doing little at her troop meetings except cookie stuff — *I need three boxes of Trefoils! Can I trade these two Tag-a-longs for two Thin Mints? When does the money*

The cookie has also crumbled somewhat for her own girl scout, Patricia, age ten, who literally went along for the ride during cookie open season: picking up the initial 150-case order (two trips), zipping over to the cookie

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- SUSAN NORMAND, CPA

have to be in? How much do I owe anyway? Whaddaya mean you don't have any more Samoas! — she's had enough.

"It's just become sell, sell, sell, sell, *sell*, and it's not fun. It's not fun for the parents. It's not fun for the girls. It's just not fun," she says.

depots five times to fill re-orders (twice to Rockville, twenty-five miles away), dropping cookies off at people's houses (often late at night), depositing money (only during banking hours), and, of course, turning in the interminable forms (for a fifteen-girl troop the TCM must administer at

least fifty-five forms to keep an accurate accounting of the fundraiser).

After they dropped off the final pack of paperwork, Patricia asked her mother if she was planning to be Cookie Mom next year. "I told her 'No, probably not,'" recalls Normand. "Patricia's answer was, 'Good.' I asked her why. She said I do too much cookie stuff and it takes too much of my time."

Normand admits she's probably suffering from volunteer burnout. As a single mother, she has precious little time to indulge in non-essential activities. Perhaps it's time to pass the job to someone else before she ends up on the evening news for wantonly hurling Thin Mints out her car window onto I-95.

Thankfully, new volunteers do step up to the plate. Newbie Pam Cook, who serves as TCM for

Cadette Troop 717, describes her experience as relatively uneventful. The troop has only five girls in it, so that helped considerably.

She took the position late and had to scramble a bit to learn the ropes. "I didn't have any training," she says. "[The troop leader] actually signed the form to be the cookie manager. I just read the book." What a coup to find someone who actually reads the manual.

Despite quickly learning the particulars of assuming her part of the cookie drive frenzy, Cook had to work around the logistical problem of having lots of cookies filling her already space-challenged house. She and troop leader Melissa Steiner decided to work as a team: Cook handled the forms while Steiner housed the ninety-one cases of cookies in her comparatively empty living room.

Cook welcomed the help and support from ten-year scouting veteran Steiner. But, physically distant from her pre-packaged charges, Cook admitted to some mild consternation in keeping an up-to-date account of who's got what. Next year she plans to find a way to cram them into her own house. Maybe she could implement a scouting version of *feng shui*?

Cook's chief worry echoes Normand's: "The real scary part for me was making sure we had sold enough to pay off Council."

What's "enough?" About eighty-three percent of a troop's gross receipts. Troops set their own selling goals, but once ordered they are accountable for every box. They keep fifty cents out of each three-dollar box sold and forward the remainder to the Council. For Normand's Troop 2355, the total

revenues for the twenty-one hundred boxes her troop sold comes to \$6,300; this divvies up to \$1,050 for the troop and \$5,250 for GSCNC — a big chunk of change.

But has this prevailing fearful mindset to keep Big Mama happy may become something of an urban legend? Cheryl Hall, employed by GSCNC as a Product Sales Specialist — the council level of the cookie managerial hierarchy — says, "We've been trying to encourage people not to pay us off first."

Many cookie moms cover outstanding money themselves from deadbeat scouting families, and then seek reimbursement. Hall asserts that's counter-productive. GSCNC has much more power to pursue a delinquent account than does a lowly TCM. "Good-hearted souls pay the debt from their own pockets. Then we can't follow up," she explains.

Also, training materials do describe how to deposit money correctly and handle deadbeats. A boxed, bolded sentence warns against trying to cope with a bad debt personally. So why the collective nail-biting and debt-covering?

Because, despite Hall's got-yer-back claims, a TCM's paperwork sends a different message. They are constantly and ominously reminded of the fiscal burden they bear. At sign-on, a TCM contracts to "*deposit the full amount of money due to GSCNC on or before April fill-in-the-date, two-thousand-something*" (Form NC-13). For the initial delivery and every cookie depot pick-up, a Cookie Mom sandwiches her signature between the calculated figure of her debt — usually thousands of dollars — to Council and the statement "*I acknowledge receipt of the*

TOSSING COOKIES

The annual Girl Scout Cookie Sale functions at every organizational layer within the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital, or GSCNC. Thirty-nine hundred troops comprise GSCNC in the D.C. Metropolitan area — nearly forty-six thousand registered girls. One of three-hundred Councils set up across the United States, GSCNC divides itself into twenty-one regions called Associations, which are then sub-divided into one-hundred and thirty-seven Service Units, making administration of huge projects like cookie-selling more manageable.

That sounds like a lot of girls selling a lot of cookies, making a lot of money for Council. But consider let's do the math: A box of cookies costs \$3.00. After subtracting out the \$1.10 wholesale cost of producing the cookies, a \$1.90 remains. Troops keep fifty cents per box, leaving \$1.40 for Council. Out of this, only fourteen percent is channeled to administrative costs; eight percent is used to train adult volunteers for leadership positions; over seventy-seven percent is spent directly on the girls via camping facilities, day trips, and other services.

above total cases of cookies and agree to pay Council the specified amount prior to April fill-in-the-date, two-thousand-something" (Forms NC-3 and NC-4). Who wouldn't be a little nervous?

So the TCMs, charged with ordering and disbursing goods and collecting money — make a financial Girl Scout Cookie Promise. The girls — or, often, their parents — do the selling, through either direct orders. And then there are the booth sales.

Booth sales really fill the troop's cookie jars. Instituted in 1975, booth sales effectively sell cookies minus the potential danger of girls selling door-to-door. They're always held during the month of March in the D.C. area. They're everywhere. Rather fun for the girls. A boatload of work for the adults.

Serita Brewer, Booth Sales Coordinator for Lanham-based Service Unit 22-6 (troops are grouped within a Council into Service Units to ease administration complexities), works to facilitate these impossible-to-duck sidewalk solicitations by uniformed girls laying in wait at grocery stores and gas stations. Her job? Scoring busy, coveted spots to hawk cookies, which harbors a high clash potential among the twenty-one motivated troops in Service Unit 22-6. Brewer strives to prevent this un-girl-scout-like conduct.

Also co-leader for Troop 3057 and Cookie Mom for that troop, the triple-jobbed Brewer has been the coordinator for five years running. Every year she solicits local businesses within the Service Unit's ten-mile wide boundaries. Although there's less paperwork than for the TCM, the job requires tenacity, diplomacy, and hours of driving around, cultivating business relationships, following up.

Brewer tries to maintain contacts with local merchants from year to year, "but managers change, and policies change within the businesses," she says. "A lot of businesses don't understand what I'm doing. Businesses really need to know that we're not out there begging."

After negotiating booth locations, Brewer devises and then disseminates a chart of available booth sale openings. Troops then submit their requests and Brewer doles out

Getting blasted for making a mistake happens all too often, though: "I had a parent who sent me an email — and she broadcast the email — that she didn't think that what I was doing was fair, and why does such-and-such troop get this and she didn't get that."

Brewer mostly shrugs off these negative experiences. "It doesn't bother me that they get mad at me," she says. "I don't even care, because I'm doing it and [they're] not. This is a volunteer thing, but I

"This is a volunteer thing, but I can be fired. Fire me. Take it over. Fine, you can have it."

- SERITA BREWER, BOOTH SALES COORDINATOR

the slots via a self-devised lottery system — troop numbers scrawled onto slips of paper and drawn out of a paper lunch bag. Despite her attempts at fairness, issues still arise: "Last year I double-booked two places. One of them was my troop," she chuckles.

Sometimes more serious problems present themselves, like when she unwittingly dropped a troop off the lottery list. "They just didn't make it into the bag," Brewer recalls. She recalls how the troop leader was surprisingly understanding.

can be fired. Fire me. Take it over. Fine, you can have it." And next year? Will she hang in there? Probably, she admits.

So will Kelly Hamilton, Service Unit Cookie Manager. New to the position that oversees everything cookie within a Service Unit, she laughs as she remembers the moment she volunteered: "When I raised my hand to say I'd be the Service Unit Cookie Manager, everyone looked at me like, 'Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?' I said nope, and I figured it was bad because no one else wanted to volunteer."

"Cookie Nanny" Hamilton says that the beginning was easy, owing largely to her impressively organized notebook system, divided by troop. She received the initial troop orders, tallied everything, and sent it on down the line. She supervised the disbursement to the troops in late February — delayed two weeks by the brutal winter weather. Still, not too bad.

At the end, though, Hamilton spent nearly thirty hours reconciling the twenty-one accounts, where she tallied up each troop's initial order, all their trips to re-order depots, total cookies received, total boxes altogether, total amount due, total paid to council, total paid to troop profits, and balance due from delinquent troops.

Most troops' accounts resolved without too much pain, but there were some concerns, like one hapless first-time Cookie Mom left with a \$6,133 outstanding balance. Whoa.

"She was misled on the number of boxes to order for booth sales," Hamilton explains. "You know it's hard to estimate sometimes, and she didn't have too much guidance." So much for training.

No, the cookies cannot be returned. Poor planning or bad advice? Tough luck. "The mom was about to panic and fall apart," says Hamilton. And who could blame her? Remember Forms NC-13, and NC-3, and NC-4? Her signature is on the bottom line of all of them. The Service Unit, however, bent the deadline rules for booth sales, allowing this troop extra opportunities to dump their load, and prevailed upon fellow troops to assist.

Lack of in-troop parental help can also sour a volunteer's experience and re-upping potential. Two

current Cookie Moms have already begged off for next year. Hamilton points to a line midway down her tally form — the one with the \$6000+ debt. "Like this lady here: She had two-hundred and ninety-five cases of cookies. She was the only one that showed up to get the cookies. So, we — me, Serita, and a troop leader named Debbie, who also had her children there — we helped her pack her cookies. And it was snowing. It was a mess."

ing from Mom, her soft brown eyes light up: "Oh yeah! Hershey Park!"

But in spite of the cares and woes and gnashing of teeth, these four adult volunteers still agree that scouting is worth it in the end — even with the wretched cookies. Service Unit Coordinator Hamilton: "That's all I do: girl scouts, school, anything that revolves around [my daughters] and their activities." Booth sale Brewer: "I have this sick thing that

"They're working for a greater goal. It really helps them understand that things like trips aren't free. Cookies provide a means to get there."

— KELLY HAMILTON, SERVICE UNIT COOKIE MANAGER

So why go through all this? GSCNC's top cookie Cheryl Hall cites benefits to the girls. "They're working for a greater goal. It really helps them understand that things like trips aren't free. Cookies provide a means to get there."

Hamilton's scouting daughters, Brea, twelve, and Amara, eight, agree. Sort of. They both think the booth sales are "fun." Goal setting? Amara is unsure: "Um, give it to poor people?" After some prompt-

I do: If I didn't get it right the first time I like to do it until I get it right." New TCM Cook: "Yeah. Sure, why not. Help out the troop." Even exiting, jaded Cookie Mom Normand: "Nobody wanted to do it, and my kids wanted to be in scouts."

By the way, if you're looking for a post-season box of Thin Mints, Normand's still got plenty stashed in her dining room. Where can she meet you?