Neville Park Press
presents

SANDY's PC INDEPENDENT

On the north-west corner of Queen Street East and Silver Birch Avenue is a parking lot that attracts east-bound drivers eager to use it as a bypass of the (relatively) new traffic lights. One driver might simply want to head north; one might want to make a U-turn and snatch an open Green P space. Mostly, though, the lot fills with customers eager to run in and do a quick shopping at the PC Independent grocery store. Watched by patient dogs lining the sidewalk, loosely tied either to a parking meter or near their water bowl by the benches, these human seekers after food go in and out of Sandy's door from 8:00 every morning to 9:00 every night.

When you see Sandy, she could be doing one of the many tasks rampant in a busy store. She stocks shelves, often on a step-up since she is short as well as lively. She runs to open a cash register if the lineup down the end aisle gets too long. She changes item prices from black-coded regular to red-coded sale. And she is stoppable by any customer with a question ~ "Where is this?" "What is that?" "Can you get…?"

Sandy's good life ethics and habits are inbred. She was born and raised in Toronto's Portuguese neighbourhood downtown, where the family focus was on paying off one's mortgage. As she got older, she enjoyed trying new foods and experimenting with different recipes: food is something she really enjoys, especially if sharing. This is no surprise, considering most of the recipes she experimented with were amazing concoctions improved by generations of Azoreans.

This love of food provided a promising start for her current status in the grocery store business. She started working part time in Manulife Loblaws' bakery after high school classes, and then came on fulltime for many years at the Bay and Bloor location. However, she did not remain in the bakery, as she wanted to continue learning in a place where she didn't have to learn, as one must in school. Assigned to cash register, she quickly acquired that skill and built on it to become front-end manager. She always said "Yes!" when a corporate course or opportunity was offered, as her confidence grew with each successful aspect of the business she learned. "It's easy when you're in school because the answers are all in the back of the book. But once out, I had to do it on my own, I'd find quicker ways to do a task, or figure out my own way to make things more efficient. It became like a puzzle coming together! My eyes would open as more opportunities came along, so the unknown stopped scaring me. I could do more, find out what works, and make more customers happy, and that's my motivation, that's what makes my days full and satisfying."

Sandy had loved her accounting courses in high school but whenever thinking of it as a career, she'd backed off and gone for Loblaws' bakery instead. However, along with eventually being promoted to front end manager, she became responsible for the cash office and scheduling cashiers. It was then she began to learn the more difficult active side of working with people: supervising without bossing. Coming from a large and extended family, she drew on those memories when faced with conflicts and complaints and in general, was able to live and teach her maxim: "At the end of the day it matters more that we all get along, so no one has to walk on

eggshells but can focus on learning & growing on the job."

After a couple of decades, Sandy decided to take the chain's training courses for franchisees, so when the Beach Valu Mart came up she was ready to take it on. Sandy's PC Independent is what is called a 'secondary' store: that is, in partnership with Loblaws. As this was how the Manulife location had worked during her latter years there, she'd already gone through the huge learning curve away from working under a complete ownership to partial. Now, she as manager and co-owner has the freedom to select and shelve products.

Because of this, customers may notice steady inventory change, as in the business food is perceived as fashion; certain foods become a trend. For example, she brought in alcohol once Ontario passed legislation allowing this, and it has proven a good solid mover. Occasionally customers request certain items and she does her best to fill their requests no matter the brand, but if despite her efforts it is beyond her means due to pricing or lack of storage, she may not be able to include it. However, from almost a lifetime of using them, she feels that PC products truly are the finest and thus is confident she is providing the best. "We are here for the customer," she told me. "I and my staff always do what we can to make them happy. I feel more confident in what I do the longer I do it, as I gain experience. My customers help me along that path."

Speaking as one such satisfied customer, I can report that Sandy was most helpful when I had knee surgery and could not come to her store for my groceries. She took my credit card info, set up an account, I'd email her what I needed, and a staff member would deliver to my door. In fact, the bags got hauled right into my kitchen once each saw my wrapped knee. How great is that?

When you visit Sandy's, remember to have a word with the dogs leashed outside ~ especially if one is moaning because the human to whom that dog prefers to be attached has not been seen for over two minutes. That's what Sandy does.



Sandy at her sign raising in 2023

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