

Hooked On Recovery

December 30, 2005

201

"I'm a big man, like to have my fun. I go by the number of 161. No one knows more. About what's in this store, than 314. How do you do? How do you be? That skinny little dude is 413."
-- A bad attempt at rap lyrics by yours truly.

I was lucky. For the very first 14 months of my recovery, God put me in the perfect place – a large furniture store. I got a job as a salesman and that's how I got lucky. This store was huge, fourteen acres huge. Their sales system looked like this; the salesperson at the top of the queue would be assigned to a customer as they came in. A customer was an 86. Salespeople were 27's and each salesperson got their own personal number. I was 161. Some salespeople had been there forever. 29 had been there for something like 50 years. 80 cruised the perimeter all day. 181 would reply "yep, that's a nice one" every time someone asked him a question. 143 was in her late 60's and had worked there for ten years. Last year I stopped in and she was still selling, now well into her 80's. 292 was still there too and showed me some pics of some recent fish he had caught. I met some good people there. 314 and I had a lot of laughs until he left to become a Correctional Officer. 75 was the sales "manager". She was the owner's favorite for reasons other than her sales ability. She would do anything; I mean anything to get a sale. She'd lie, sell things not in stock, offer discounts (when no one else could), deliver it the next day, etc. She was attractive yet her elevator didn't quite make it to the top floor. We heard her talking to an 86. She was excited to be going to Puerto Rico on vacation. The customer asked, "So, you'll be seeing San Juan?" and 75 replied, "Nooooo, Puerto Rico!!"

The main character in the furniture store soap opera was 201, the owner. A Jewish immigrant, he escaped the war, came over from Europe and opened a small furniture repair shop. From very humble beginnings, he built an amazing furniture empire. He was the guy who came up with the number system. He also numbered locations in the store. 27 was the front of the store. It is also the number for a salesperson, I have no idea why. It was 201's system. 37 was the mezzanine level where he had his office (17). By the time I worked for him, he was getting on in years. He was in his 80's. He hobbled around the store, always sported an extreme crumpled look and had hired someone to empty his drool cup. Just kidding about the drool cup, I have Monty Python flashbacks from time to time. 201 ruled the fourteen acres from a beat up old office chair at the top of the steps to the mezzanine. From his throne, he worked the intercom system. Every few minutes, "Any available 27 (salesperson), there's an 86 (customer) at 37 (mezzanine). ANY 27, there's an 86 at 37!" 201 hated any customer to be left alone to just browse.

201 could not have achieved this level of success without knowing a thing or two. He especially knew customers and how to sell. He knew his prices were the best so the 27's were not allowed to haggle (75 excluded). Of course, being brand new in recovery and having the maturity of a 12 year old, none of this occurred to me. I thought he was just plain nuts. For example, I was working with this couple for several hours on a brand new Thomasville solid oak dining room set. The sale was about \$4,000 which meant a \$40 commission for me. I had the sale written up when the man says, "I know the old man. I want something taken off. I don't care if it's \$25. If he won't, then we walk." Uh oh. I approached 201 on his office chair throne and relayed the story to him. 201 says "no, they'll be back" and dismissed me with a vigorous wave of his hand that knocked some spittle from his drool cup onto his collar. "But, but... he's going to walk."

“No!” with another wave of his hand, more flying spittle and now 201 started to turn a little purple. I walked away a little scarlet myself. So I gave the couple the old man’s response. Without hesitating, they walked out the door.

Having little control of my emotions, I allow myself to turn purple. I stomped right up to 201 on his throne with the order in my hand and growled, “I told you they’d walk!” With each word, I tore the sales slip in two and when I was done I threw it at his feet and walked away. Two minutes later over the intercom, “161 come see 201 at 17, 161 come see 201 at 17.” I’m cooked. I’m fired. I trudged back to his office, moping all the way. 201 stuck his finger in my chest (I was a foot taller than him) and eyeballing me through thick glasses said, “If you ever do that again I fire you on the spot. Now, I give you a 25 cent raise per hour. Get out of here and go sell more furniture!”

Surprise, surprise. 201 saw that I cared enough to get angry about a sale. He was willing to stick with me. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if he fired me. Could my recovery have handled it? I got lucky again. This furniture store was the place I used to begin to heal from years of addiction. For almost 60 hours a week, for 14 months, I worked in 201’s store. The store was beautiful, peaceful, comfortable and safe. When business was slow it was OK to find a faraway, isolated nook and read. I read the Big Book and the 12 & 12 several times over. I bathed myself in a program of recovery and it took.

One other thing I learned about 201 was that he loved chicken. He ate it in his office for lunch and dinner. When he was done with a piece he would discard the bones by throwing them over his shoulder into the corner where they hit the wall and fell into a waste can. I was working the day 201 died eating chicken in his office. I never got the chance to thank him for giving me sanctuary and for believing in me.

Thanks 201. And by the way, that couple you said would come back, they did. I never told you that either. 161.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.