

## Sweet Work

By Jessica Taafe

*Ashley Miller hopes to grow beyond the candy counter, but she says her long-time job at Gorant's has been filled with satisfaction and plenty of chocolate.*

The bell rings to welcome another customer into Gorant's Cards and Candies on Kirk Road in Austintown. Ashley Miller looks up from her tray of meltaways to say "hello" just as the wafting smell of freshly-dipped chocolate engulfs the customer's nostrils. The petite girl, just a smidge over five feet tall, who said hello, is so unobtrusive that she sometimes doesn't get a hello in return.

"That happens to me even when I'm not at work, people don't seem to realize that I am there, maybe it's because I'm so small, but maybe it's because I look so non-threatening," Miller says.

Her hazel eyes are covered by plastic rimmed glasses, and always seem to be focused on the floor. Her curly, jet black hair has never been outside of a bun since it was long enough to be pulled back.

"It's just easy doing the same thing everyday," Miller says. "I guess you could say that I hate change."

"Ever since I was a little girl, I never liked getting used to new things," Miller continues. "I'm the oldest of three children, so you would think I was used to change with two siblings changing my world around every couple years," she says of her 16-year-old sister Lauren and 17-year-old brother Tyler.

Ashley's resistance to change has kept her employed at Gorant's for more than five years.

"When I was 15, my Nana got me a job with her to do seasonal work at Gorant's. After a while, it turned out to be a part-time position that I love," Miller said.

Recently promoted to a manager, Miller is leery of the added responsibility.

"I'm so nervous that I'm going to screw up and everyone's going to think I'm stupid," she says. "It took me years to even learn the cash register."

As a student at Hubbard High School (she graduated in 2003) Miller never excelled in any particular subject.

"I sort of just slipped below the radar and just did enough to pass," she says. Her fear of the cash register probably began early in her academic career because math was her weakest point.

"It's no wonder I have bad self-esteem. When we took our career aptitude tests in high school, everyone else got these high-paying, good jobs and what did the test say that I was best suited for? A taxi driver," Miller says.

Miller, now a college sophomore, is majoring in photography.

"I'm not really good at anything else, and I like to take pictures, and I enjoy the classes, so hopefully I won't be at Gorant's the rest of my life," Miller says. Working at Gorant's, however, does have its advantages. Although part-time employees do not get paid vacations, they are allowed to take off as many days as they need for family vacations, or even school.

"Gorant's gives me a lot to do, but they always make sure that I'm comfortable with scheduling and are very accommodating," Miller says.

As a counter manager, she has many responsibilities. She makes the candies right in the store, fills up empty card racks, waits on customers, and supervises the floor.

The best part, she says, is her co-workers.

"I don't think anyone has ever been fired from Gorant's; everyone loves their job, and is there for a long period of time," she says.

Despite lifting heavy boxes all day, and having to stand on her feet or walk around the store for most of her five-hour shifts, Miller says she doesn't feel tired when she finishes work.

"I don't get tired because every once in a while during the shift the store is empty, so we all sit at the front of the store on the counters and pound down candy," Miller says. All employees are permitted to sample the chocolate. "During a normal day, I probably eat about a pound of chocolate."

She said that eating well goes with the job. "Not to mention our 15-minute breaks we get for every two hours we work, there's always food in the break room for us to eat while we sit and talk," Miller says.

Miller says her co-workers are now family to her. "All the younger workers get together out of work to hang out; we all became really good friends through the company."

Every few months, Gorant's has a store meeting where all of the employees discuss new store policies.

"The store meetings are the best! They take a few hours but most of the time we're playing games and eating. Like on our Easter meetings we have egg hunts and the eggs are filled with chocolate and money, it's always a blast."

Smiling, she says it is not true that most of the Gorant's customers are "old people who want bridge mix." She says it is hard to categorize what the customers want, but one thing most are adamant about is understanding their charges.

"I remember I had this old lady in the store once that wanted a one pound box of assorted chocolate wrapped. I looked on the racks and there were none wrapped, so I told her that it's a dollar extra for wrapping and she agreed to the service charge. After I wrapped the box and rang up her order, she questioned why her order was a dollar more than it should've been, so I reminded her of the service charge for the wrapping. She said that there was a sign out there for pre-wrapped boxes at \$8.95. I told her that I know the sign is there, but all of the pre-wrapped boxes were gone and for me to wrap the box was an extra dollar. She still didn't understand, it took me a good ten minutes to finally get through to her."

She said customers aren't stupid, they just want everything exactly how it is in their minds, and they "know exactly how much they spend all of the time."

She has a strategy for what to do when she is getting annoyed with a customer. "I'll just pretend that it's one of my grandparents. Then, I'm even more patient." Miller has had to walk away from annoying customers on more than one occasion.

"I remember this one time a woman came in looking for these little figures cut out of wood, called Willow Tree Angels. I was helping her find them and she picked out three figures that she wanted. Each figure is hand carved and hand painted, so obviously they're going to look different from each other."

"The woman, Gladys, wanted figures that hadn't been touched, so I went to the back to see if we had them in stock. Unfortunately, we only had two of the three. I told Gladys that I could wrap the one on display up for her that we didn't have in the back. She considered the idea.

The angel she picked had blue birds on the figure that were hand-painted. There were a few spots on the display figure that didn't have blue paint on it, and she said that it was damaged. I explained to her that it wasn't damaged, that they were created individually and were hand-carved and painted.

She disagreed she told me that it was because people were touching them and she wouldn't settle for the one with some blue missing. So I go in the back to answer the phone while Gladys looked around. As I was on the phone, one of my co-workers happened upon Gladys and got roped into checking if there was the angel with the blue birds on it in the back, wrapped up. So she went to check and she actually found it, I must've overlooked it or something, but she found it. The lady looked at me like I was an idiot and thanked my co-worker for correcting my mistake."

“Well, Gladys opened up the box and took the figure out and examined it and it was up to her standards with the blue paint so she took it, gave me one last disgusted look, and went on her way.

When she came up to check out, I couldn't wait on her, I was too pissed, so I had to call someone else to wait on her,” she says.

This incident didn't taint Miller's enthusiasm. “I actually really like working in customer service, even after the Gladys incident.”