

First Person

A diaper man is as welcome as Cupid

'I just tell people the smell keeps the muggers out'

"Babies never change," says John D'Alessandro, but fortunately for this diaper delivery man, babies do need to be changed, about 90 times a week. That, at least, is the average number of fresh diapers he drops off in exchange for soiled ones each week per baby-customer.

D'Alessandro has been delivering diapers for Dy Dee Wash Diaper Service for 25 years. He was graduated from Chicago's Austin High School in 1955 and spent two years in the Army. He was a hardware salesman for several years before becoming a route salesman, or diaper deliveryman. He has maintained three of his five routes for more than 20 years, and he told writer Marya Smith, "I'm servicing kids now whose parents I serviced."

D'Alessandro, 50, and his wife, Barbara, live in Berwyn. They have raised five babies of their own: Peter, 24; Alicia, 22; John, 21; Michael, 18; and Nicole, 12.

The big question I get is, "How can you stand the smell?" But I call my truck my rose room. It's my bread and butter. I suppose the winter is the worst because the truck is all closed up and there's nowhere to go, but I can put deodorant back there. In the summer you've got the windows open. But I just tell people the smell keeps the muggers out.

Besides, it's a fun job. Where else can you see 500 pretty women every week? When I first started, it was "Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Smith." Now I can call them "dear" and "honey," and nobody raises an eyebrow. Now I'm the grandfatherly type.

I used to make my first stops very early, but I found that people didn't really like that. A good time to start is 7:30, 8 o'clock. The husband is getting ready for work. The wife is doing what she needs to do with the baby. I'm usually done by 3 or 3:15. I go to the plant around 5:30 a.m., though, to pick up my load and do my paperwork. Once I leave the plant, I'm my own boss. We're responsible for our own customers. We work on commission, so I collect and keep track of payments. I handle very little cash. Almost everyone pays by check or credit card.

We're a once-a-week service. It's basically an exchange system: I pick up the soiled diapers and drop off the clean ones. Some customers stay on four weeks, some for two years. It depends on the neighborhood. It averages out to about 40 weeks a customer.

A lot of people set their clocks by me. It's important for them to know that I'll be there at a certain time, not 9 a.m. one week



John D'Alessandro prepares to deliver a week's supply of cloth diapers.

and 3 p.m. the next week. The only time it's kind of tough to keep a schedule is when it's snowy or icy. When there's a foot of snow and the customer says, "You made it!" that makes you feel good.

It's very important to talk to a new customer, to introduce myself, explain the service. I tell them, "If you have any questions, let me know. Tell me when something's wrong, even if it's small." The key is to sell yourself as well as the product. They've got to be told, "I'll take care of you." They have to know you care.

With first-baby moms, you're really got to stay with them, talk to them, calm them down. With the first, they worry about everything: Am I doing this right? I always tell them: "If you're doing it, it's right. Have confidence in yourself." The first month is probably the toughest. With the second or third kid, you can really see the difference. They're so much more relaxed. They know what to do.

I have customers for four or five years who I never see after that first conversation. We just deal with notes. It's a small percentage, but it's more now because more mothers are working. But usually it's knock and talk. I don't talk for long, though, because I have to get my route done.

One time I knocked on the kitchen door and said, "Diaper man." The woman called to come in, and I saw the baby in the highchair and said: "Hi, sweetheart! How are you?" Then I heard a booming voice from the next room, "Who the hell are you?" I said, "Hey, I'm talking to the baby." But I learned to be careful. I like to make a fuss

over the baby, although I don't make such a point of seeing the babies now as I did when my five were babies. Then we were comparing notes, exchanging ideas.

I have good areas, but I work to keep them up. Mondays I'm in Oak Park, Tuesdays in Glen Ellyn, Wednesdays in Cicero, Thursdays I'm in Chicago, off Lake Shore Drive, Lakeview. And Fridays it's Berwyn and Riverside. The company has its own way of getting new customers, but we get paid extra for selling the service. The best leads are driver leads. If you can get a clique of girls, a group of friends, you can build from that.

Glen Ellyn and Oak Park are good young areas. Berwyn and Cicero are close to home, so I see those customers often, in the bank or shopping. Many have become lifelong friends. The Lake Shore area is populous, my biggest route. It's a long day, partly because there are a lot of customers but also because of the traffic and the elevator buildings. Some of those streets are no wider than an alley. You've got to figure out a way to double-park, get up to the 25th floor, without blocking off the street. But I've learned that haste makes waste. I still have to wait for the elevator to come down from the 40th floor no matter how much I'm hustling.

I see people raise themselves up. I had a customer for 12 or 13 years, for all her babies, and I told her, "I remember you when you were one of my poverty customers, and now you're aristocracy." Over the years they moved from a basement apartment to a high-rise in the same neighborhood. I've

never seen the reverse. Some people have moved out quickly, and I never heard from them again, and maybe that's what happened. Also, I have seen some neighborhoods go down the drain, and at the same time I've seen some neighborhoods shoot back up again.

I've been dealing with the same product, and I know it well. The only change I've really seen is in the volume of the business because of the competition with paper products. A lot of people say, "You're still in business?" But we have a good, select clientele. When I was younger, I had 600 customers a week, and now I have 450. Fifteen years ago I could place any customer on my route, but I've kind of lost it now. I still remember almost all the last names. I see a lot of my babies on the basketball teams, in the newspaper. I see the names, put them together.

Sometimes the office gets an emergency call, someone needing 20 diapers to hold them over until their next delivery. We take care of those whether they're on our route or not. The main problem I run into is shortages, that is, when a customer doesn't get the correct number of diapers. Sometimes the office makes a mistake, and sometimes it's because the customer didn't give them all back but she thought she did. One time, one of my Lake Shore Drive customers kept telling me, "I'm short," and then she found out her maid had been taking diapers home.

I've come to the door and had husbands answer and say, "You mean we've got diaper service?" I say, "I've been coming here for two years." They tell me they don't know where the diapers are, and I tell them to look in the baby's room in a white bucket. Some of these guys don't know what a diaper is. This happens a couple or three times a year.

Almost all of my customers are women. I've only had two Mr. Moms that I know of. I've had celebrities on my routes, and socialites. I deal with unwed mothers, often with little money. I see the full spectrum of life in this job. I try to treat each customer the same.

I've often helped customers who locked themselves out of the house. Sometimes I just wait with them until the police come because they are so upset; the baby is inside. One time the lady was seven months pregnant, her baby was inside in the highchair and there was only one way into the house, through a dusty crawl space in the basement. I climbed through for her. It only took a few minutes. She was a customer for seven or eight years, and we always talked about that.

Sometimes I'll say, "I remember when you said, 'This is the last time you'll see me,' and I told you, 'Next baby!'" We're both laughing. There's fun in this job. The customers stay the same. I'm always seeing a happy person, mothers with their babies. There's very little disillusionment with babies. It's a happy business. ■

Feature photo by Anne Casarek