

# **BLACK MONDAY**

By Sara Hall Todd

It was a Monday morning in 1991, more or less like any other. My husband and I had had a relaxing weekend, playing bridge with friends and watching TV and doing the usual shopping and household chores. Now I was ready for another week of meetings, coding, testing, and admin -- my normal week as a systems project manager at the Humana Corporate Center in Louisville, KY. I took the bus to work as usual. I opened the door to the building and everything seemed normal. But appearances can be deceiving. I took the elevator up to the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor, walked into my cubicle next to the secretaries' desk area, and saw a memo on my desk. I knew I hadn't left it there, so I picked it up and read it.

It was addressed to the entire programming staff of 200 on the two floors we occupied in the Humana tower. I was instructed to remain in my cubicle until further notice. I was informed that my access to the system via computer had been cut off, and that I was to make no phone calls. I felt sick. I tried to log on anyway, and my logon was rejected. They weren't kidding.

I wanted coffee. Did I dare go to the break room to get it? What if I needed to go to the bathroom? Would one of the secretaries escort me to the boss's office if I showed my face outside the cube walls?

I usually arrived about 5 minutes before 8:00, so by 8:00 I figured most of my colleagues were surely there as well. But there was a surreal silence in the office. No conversation, no keyboards clicking, just the sterile white noise. I stood up and looked over the cube walls. The face of a friend a couple of aisles over appeared over his cube wall, and we mouthed "what's going on?" and shrugged shoulders... then it began.

Just beyond the secretarial area was a meeting room. People began to be escorted into the room. I couldn't hear the words, but I heard a lot of sobbing from the female employees, and a lot of raised voices from

the males. A few slammed the door on their way out. No one was in there for more than 5 minutes, usually less; then it was the next, and the next. It had to be a huge layoff. The longer it went on, the more the tension built. I'd hear footsteps coming towards my cube. Was I going to be the next victim? Then the steps would continue past me. I lost count, but later learned that 80 programmers – remember, there were originally 200 – were laid off that day. It took two hours. At 10:00 a.m. those of us who remained were told to leave the office and return the next day. Of course there was huge relief among those of us who still had jobs, but stunned concern for our friends who had lost theirs.

The next day we learned that all programmers who had less than a year with the company had been let go, and after that Management depended on evaluations to decide, or in some cases they ditched projects and let the entire project team go. The layoff included one of my best friends, Linda Gayle, who was an outstanding employee but was 4 days short of completing a year with the company. That really hit me hard, but I also knew several others who were laid off whom I would really miss. Others, especially the ones on the other floor, I didn't know at all. The enormity of the event was overwhelming. My team was still intact, but shaken. They called it "survivor's guilt", and offered counseling to those of us who were left, in addition to the counseling they offered to those laid off.

We found out later that the layoffs had originally been scheduled to take place on the previous Friday, then someone had come up with statistics that there was more likelihood of suicide if a person, particularly one who lived alone, was laid off on a Friday and had the whole weekend to contemplate the collapse of life as he or she knew it. Or end that life.

It was a day I'll never forget. Although I continued to work at Humana for 5 more years, it was never the same. After a couple of years, the horror of that day didn't come to mind as often, but my loyalty to the company never regained its previous level. In due course there was a split between the hospital and insurance sides of the company, then a

merger. New technology was introduced, management changes were made, and eventually it was just another job. But a job I never took for granted. Nor would I ever take one for granted again.