

Indispensable

Custodians prepare way for learning

By MAIKE VAN WIJK
Contributing Writer

At the end of lunch hour, high school students walk away from the clutter and mess they've created and resume their studies.

But a half-hour later, the cafeteria is clean. Trash picked up from the floor. Chairs wiped clean. Tables cleaned and put up. Floor cleaned.

It's a job school custodians do every day in every school, and they do it so efficiently that hardly anyone notices.

During classes, custodians roam the hallways and monitor restrooms. Broken equipment is reported and replaced. Windows are washed, school grounds kept clean.

"Custodians have an important function to prove a safe and clean school," says Mark Krueger, business manager of the Splendora Independent School District. "Having a clean environment stimulates learning."

Humble and Kingwood High buildings are never empty during the week. The day shift arrives at 6 a.m. just as the over-night shift ends.

Custodians are on the job at Splendora High from 6 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., and at New Caney High from 6:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Weekend activities require extra



NEVER-ENDING JOB. Versie Roddy, head custodian at Kingwood High, says school custodians take a lot of pride in what they're able to accomplish, sometimes in the face of difficult obstacles such as floods and construction work.

shifts.

Versie Roddy, head custodian at Kingwood High, says the school is completely clean at 5 a.m. but when students start

coming in, the cycle begins anew.

Custodians range in age from 19 to 65 and include housewives,

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moonlighters, former house cleaners, high school graduates in the work force for the first time and even construction workers between jobs.

Roddy says most custodians start out as temporaries before being hired for the 10-month school year. Summer employment is based on attendance and work evaluations by supervisors, says Roddy, who has been head custodian for eight years.

Janice Wilson, head custodian at Humble High, says each custodian has a separate section of the school to clean. They dust, clean chalkboards, chalk trays, overhead projectors and pencil sharpeners, empty the trash and vacuum.

The gymnasiums and athletic grounds get special attention after practices or games.

Absenteeism can be a problem, Roddy says.

"If five to six are absent, that means we have five to six extra sections to clean," she says.

Wilson, who's been a custodian for 20 years, says she gets along fine with the kids.

"I'm a disciplinarian," she says. "I think my gray hair scares them. I tell the kids 'I want you to do it and I want you to do it now.'"

"Some I had to win to me, but most students now call me grandma," she says.

Buddy Gros, head custodian at New Caney High, says relationships with teachers and students has improved.

"At the end of the school year this place (previously) would be trashed," he says. "We spent two to three days cleaning lockers. Sometimes we spent more time cleaning gum off than the lockers themselves. But now the Student Council goes up and down the halls with trash bags, and the principal has worked to make it a lot better."

"It's nothing spectacular, but we try to make the job fun," says Gros, who is pursuing a vocational teaching degree. "Every day something happens."

Something like the October flood, which affected Kingwood High.

"We had the worst damage I'd ever seen," Roddy says. "We couldn't get in the school until the water receded Thursday morning."

"The 100 hall (at the front of the building) had six to eight inches of water. In the auditorium, the water reached up to the stage, which is about five or six feet. The wood floor of the gymnasium was raised up six to seven feet by the water."

"The supervisors told us to have the school ready by Monday. I didn't think it was possible but we did it. All 20 custodians were there. I called other schools for help, and supervisors and maintenance people came out to help us as well," Roddy says.

Memories of the flood have remained fresh. The last of the repairs are just now being completed, Roddy says.

Wilson also recalls a situation when it seemed impossible to get the school ready on time.

It was 11 years ago when the Humble High commons area was added. At the time, Wilson's sister was head custodian.

"A week before school started I came in and saw all the concrete and dust on the floor. I asked 'are you sure school will be open on Monday?' She said they would make it, and on the first day of classes the building was sparkling. They must have scraped that cement off the floor. I don't know how they made it but they did."

"This is not a perfect job," Wilson says. "If there were a perfect job, everybody would want it. We have good times. Sometimes, when we've accomplished a lot, I'll buy a gallon of ice cream and we finish it up. We also have pot luck dinners."



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Behind the Scenes at T-Bird

By Maike van Wijk

They speed around in their electrical carts and always have a smile to offer. When there is a leak or a light-bulb goes out, these are the men and women who swing by to have the problem fixed. The Facilities, Maintenance and Landscape employees are highly vital to the life of Thunderbird.

"We do most things in-house," said Tony Eck, Lead Mechanic for the Maintenance Department. "This means we can usually be there that day."

Recently, a student in the A-Dorm asked housing to have a light-bulb fixed in the bathroom. Within 10 minutes, a maintenance employee arrived. While at times these minor jobs have a longer waiting time, one can be sure that maintenance will be there to mop up leaks and fix broken waterlines within minutes.

Facilities service personnel change about 25 light-bulbs per day. "And that's 7 days a week," said Kathy Dewees, Facilities Office Manager. "We're always on call."

During the summer heat, the main thing to monitor are the Air-Conditioning units. With more than 500 different types of units on campus, teaching students how to use these devices and fixing the blown fuses and units frozen from mis-use take up the majority of time.

The facilities services employees change about 25 A/C filters a day. "We'd like to have the students do it themselves," said Tommy Blasinghame, Director of Facilities Services. "But then we'd find the old filter in the trash and the new filter unused next to the unit."

Having facilities take care of these items saves the A/C equipment and also saves on tuition, in the savings generated by electricity conservation. A setting of 75 degrees Fahrenheit is ideal for the A/C units, said Eck. In addition, keeping doors and windows closed when the unit is on will further prevent damage and will save energy costs.

The facilities office handles all work orders and out-sources the larger projects,

such as the Tower Cafe remodeling. The office also takes care of campus purchasing, and handles room reservations. Rooms can be reserved with 24-hour notice in the facilities office. However, since many classrooms have a waiting list, the earlier a room is reserved, the better.

The facilities web page is in the making. The department is always open for suggestions on improving campus life. "We welcome any suggestions anyone has," said Dewees. "If we know what people like, we will try to work that in."

While generally facilities work orders are fairly routine, there have been some events that put even this stable department in a bustle. One of these involved the visit of Margaret Thatcher to campus four years ago. "We had Scotland Yard and the Bomb Squat there", said Blasinghame. "We had to make 4,000 (facilities) changes that day. It was standing room only (at the TAC)."

Another event creating havoc was an August 1996 storm. A 90-minute storm with winds of 125 mph uprooted approximately 175 trees on campus and destroyed some roofs and dorms. "We get to clean these things up," Blasinghame said.

It is to the department's credit that none of the storm's traces have been left. Landscaping played a big role in that. Any visitor to campus is impressed by the bloom and greenery on campus. This environment is maintained by Lonnie Daniels and his crew, the Landscape maintenance division. Irrigation technician Roger Hogan takes care of the roses when not fixing sprinkler systems. "They hired me for irrigation and I inherited all the plants," he said recently. "It's a never-ending job out here."

Yet in spite of the hard work these people perform daily in the background of Thunderbird's events, they always wear a smile and work with pride. "Sometimes saying hi to someone makes their day," Eck said. "Almost everybody knows we treat our customers very well."

Such is the spirit of the Facilities Umbrella. As Dewees said: "Service is our first, middle and last name."

