

**MR. FIX IT: CUSTODIAL ENGINEER NEAL OLDIS KEEPS FOREST HILLS HIGH SCHOOL RUNNING SMOOTHLY**

BY Jacob E. Osterhout

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By title, Neal Oldis is a custodial engineer.

But, go ahead, call him janitor. He doesn't mind.

"Most people just refer to me as a janitor," says the 65-year-old Elmhurst native and father of three. "The polite ones call me a custodian. As long as they pay me every two weeks, they can call me whatever they like. It's just a name."

The custodial engineer at Forest Hills High School in Queens for four years, Oldis is in charge of maintaining the physical structure of the 74-year-old school building (plus the accompanying fields), which currently accommodates 4,000 students, nearly 50% more than initially intended.

"My professional obligations are to provide a safe, clean, heated and sanitary environment within which the kids can learn," he says from behind a cluttered desk in his office. "They call us a jack of all trades but a master of none. We take care of everything from changing locks to unclogging toilets to fixing the air-conditioning."

And if Oldis maintains the 256,000 square foot school building like he maintains his facial hair, he is neat and meticulous.

"During these tight economic times, you have to make good use of what you have," says Forest Hills High School principal Saul Gootnick, "and Neal is extremely good at that."

After returning from a stint in the Navy, Oldis entered the workforce as a cleaner at Grover Cleveland High School in 1973. A short man of solid build, he worked his way up from cleaner to the guy who shovels coal into and out of the furnace by 1987.

"Fourteen years of shoveling coal caused me to lose my sense of smell," he says. "Then I got promoted to stationary fireman, which meant I could operate the school's six high-pressure boilers. It was like Evil Kenevil with six rockets."

After five years working the boilers, Oldis passed the city exam to become a custodial engineer. Now he manages a crew of 16 cleaners, fieldsmen, stationary firemen and handymen, and even has his own secretary.

But Oldis is by no means above getting his hands dirty. In fact, that's the part of his job he enjoys the most.

"I like to accomplish things," he says. "I take great satisfaction in fixing a problem structurally, whether that be unclogging a toilet or fixing the air-conditioning system."

According to Oldis, his job has changed a lot since he started. Not only has the engineering aspect become more computerized and technical, but the massive amount of paperwork he has to fill out is now mainly digital, requiring him to spend more time sending emails than changing light bulbs.

The biggest change to his job, however, is on the environmental side.

"Did you know that the Board of Education is the biggest user of electricity of any of New York's municipal agencies," he asks. "So now the mayor is training us to be more energy conservationist, which is hard because we don't control everything. It has to be a complete team effort."

While Oldis can't turn off every light in the school, he can install timers on the light switches and make it easier for the students to recycle.

And when New York gets hit with a snowstorm or a hurricane, Oldis is on hand to make sure his school is open on time.

"When no one else can handle a problem, we take care of it," he says. "That includes hurricane preparation, snow removal, or voting stations. People forget that the government uses school buildings all the time because they are massive areas where cots can be set up and food can be stored."

Winter can be especially harsh on Oldis, considering he lives in Coram, Long Island, 60 miles from work. But no amount of snow will keep him from arriving at school by 7 a.m.

"I tell my guys that if I can make it to school in time to shovel off the walkways, you better be here too," he says. "When they say there will be a delayed opening, we have to be here around four in the morning, and sometimes we'll stay until 10 at night."

During the recent hurricane, Oldis worked for 72 hours straight turning Forest Hills High School into an evacuation center. He coordinated the effort of turning the gym into a massive living area by unloading four, 800-pound pallets full of cots, blankets, dog containers, muzzles, leashes, water and baby diapers.

But hurricanes don't strike every day, and Oldis' main responsibilities are generally more mundane.

"Most of my problems are things like female students coming to me crying because her heel fell off or she lost her locket," he says. "These kids often come to me with a problem that they think is the end of the world and it is my job to either help them or direct them to the right person. After all, just because I can fix a water heater doesn't mean I can find the locket you lost four days ago."

According to recent union contracts, custodian engineers in New York City can make over \$100,000 in base pay a year.

While that might seem like a lot of money for a "janitor," the school system simply wouldn't function without them.

"Without custodial engineers, you would see normal dirt and paper turn into fire hazards," says Oldis.