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Summer vacation a myth for custodial staffs

Teams take pride in the cleanliness of their buildings

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Dover Post

Posted Aug 17, 2010 @ 04:42 PM

Dover, Del. — One day last week, Dover High School Chief Custodian Kevin Fountain walked into the school gym and looked across its gleaming, freshly waxed floor.

Even with the overhead lights off, the hardwood shined like a still pool or a sheet of perfectly clear ice.

As he surveyed the fresh wax job completed just the day before, Fountain's eyes fell on a pair of sloppy footprints in the coating, at the base of the slide-out bleachers.

Someone, somehow came into the gym from the second floor, walked down the bleacher steps, then stepped on the floor for just a moment before realizing it was not yet dry.

Fountain shook his head and rolled his eyes. An otherwise flawless wax job, and those two smudged shoe treads.

For Fountain and custodians at schools across the region, keeping feet off wet waxed floors is just one of the challenges that have to be overcome before their buildings can open for another school year.

These tight-knit teams of maintenance personnel who some call unsung heroes are charged with making even the oldest of the region's school buildings look like their doors are opening for the first time.

Fountain has been a custodian with the Capital School District for 24 years, a career that's taken him through several elementary and middle schools and landed him in the head custodian's position at Dover High.

"You have a lot of people from other schools come in and see our schools. You want it to look the best it can look for as old as it is, you want it to look as new as it can, as beautiful as it can," he said. "People say, 'Man, this is an old school, but it's kept well.'"

Summer for Fountain and his counterparts doesn't mean time off or a break from the heavy work of the school year.

"People think everything slows down or stops," said Dover Principal Gene Montano. "I think it's the busiest time of year. It's a very hard job. It's very strenuous and it calls for a lot of commitment."

The biggest summer job at any school is moving all the desks, bookcases and chairs out of every room in the building, scrubbing those rooms from top to bottom, then moving it all back in again.

Mike Bivins, Mr. Mike to staff and students, is chief custodian at East Dover Elementary School.

He said the simple shuffle-out, clean, shuffle-in cycle takes up most of his four-man crew's time.

"We'll start in classrooms. We'll start cleaning desks and chairs, removing gum, tape and whatever. That takes about an hour, then we remove the furniture," he said. "Then we go to waxing it. We use five coats of wax."

With dry time, the work of cleaning a room can take two full days.

And though the hallways may look like a chaotic jumble of furniture during the big clean, it's a highly organized and carefully choreographed situation.

"You've got to have a plan first," Bivins said. "You fail to plan, your plan will fail, so plan your work and work your plan."

Veterans like Fountain and Bivins, who's worked for the district for 15 years, also know you need the right equipment for the jobs that have to get done.

Years ago, Fountain said, the mop and bucket were the tools of choice, but things have evolved.

The mighty Kaivac, a cross between a pressure washer and a vacuum, is especially good for bathrooms, while the propane-powered Barracuda can prepare floors for waxing in record time with its two massive scrubbing pads.

"You go in the bathroom, you put your solution down all over, then you pressure wash it, you spray it all down, then you suck it all up. It smells really fresh," Fountain said of the Kaivac.

But even with a foolproof plan of action and fleet of specialized machines, the work is understandably grueling.

Ed Piper, a custodian at Caesar Rodney High School, said team leaders have other challenges in addition to their deadlines.

"Motivation," he said. "Keeping people motivated when it's the same thing everyday; you come in, empty a classroom, clean it and put stuff back."

That's why Bivins makes a special effort to connect with his fellow workers.

"General, father, big brother, friend, companion, whatever it takes to get along with these guys," he said. "If we're friends things go a lot easier. I was on the other end when I was a custodian. You've got to be able to work with people; you've got to know you've been there before."

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