

Keeping it clean

Rockdale's school custodians enjoy their seemingly thankless job

By Lee Kolb
Neighbor Staff Writer

Down the clean, carpeted hallways, inside polished white walls, rises the quiet hum of hundreds of students shifting hundreds of papers and chairs.

A sense of cleanliness and order greets visitors to Conyers Middle School.

Responsible for the atmosphere is a group of people who rarely get public attention — the school custodians.

Flora Beck, Stephanie Harris, Laverne Beasley, Janice Brown, and Jauneise Garner, make up the full-time custodial day shift at Conyers Middle School. The crew arrives at 8:30 each morning.

They have one hour to prepare the school before the buses roll in from the countryside to dispense sixth, seventh and eighth-graders.

"We wash down walls, vacuum carpets, sweep floors, and clean bathrooms," said Garner, custodial supervisor of four years.

"It's just like housecleaning. You start at the top and come down to the bottom," Brown said.

The school is divided up. Each woman is responsible for her own hallways, bathrooms, and classrooms, Garner said.

Beck, a four-year veteran of custodial work, maintains the hallways and bathrooms of the eighth-graders. Harris is responsible for the trailers tucked behind the school — a shining testament to overworking.

Beasley and Brown, an inseparable team, according to Garner, use their combined 12 years of experience to obliterate traces of sixth and seventh graders from 17 classrooms and bathrooms.

The janitors clean their classrooms after school hours and during the daytime when teachers are at lunch or in planning periods.

Beck, Harris, Beasley, Brown and Garner usually leave at 4:30, while a part-time crew of four attend to needs the day crew cannot.

Generally, the custodians feel their efforts do not go unnoticed by those for whom they labor.

"Most of the time the kids appreciate it, but some of them don't," Beasley said.

"But any time you've got a big crowd of people, you've got a few in there that aren't going to be thankful," Harris added.

Cafeteria food fights, a classic means of student rebellion but a major headache to cleaning personnel, are rare occurrences at Conyers Middle School, according to Garner.

"But we have had them," she said. "It wouldn't be a school if we didn't."

Garner feels the teachers do a good job keeping volatile situations under control. Students, not teachers, are responsible for most of the mess in the school, the custodians stressed.

And all agreed that middle schoolers are a messy bunch.

"But the eighth-graders are the worst," Garner said, receiving grim agreement from the hardened veterans.

Surprisingly, the janitors' hardest work is done during summer months, when small feet are tramping beaches and playing fields instead of the school's buffed floors and worn carpets.

"Most people think that when school is out, we're through. They'll say: 'Well what do you do in the summer?'" Garner said. "Summer is when we do our hardest work."

While the school bakes in the heat, deep-down cleaning begins. Windows, chairs, tables, and other surfaces are overhauled for the fall session.

"We strip floors, wax them, wash down walls," Brown said.

"We get through with the school about a week before it opens, and then we do odds and ends, like moving bookcases, and filing cabinets for teachers," Garner said.

When school begins, the women face more routine tasks, some of which should not be necessary. They criticized boys who need a little more target practice in the bathroom.

"And they don't know how to flush commodes, either," Beasley added. Three hours is the average lifespan of a clean bathroom at Conyers Middle School, she said.

The janitors reported wadded up toilet paper, gym shorts, and other articles fixed in the toilets.

"They even set the paper afire once," Harris said.

The crew spoke of a lack of supervision in the bathrooms, especially the boys'.

"We can't very well be in there when they are," Harris added.

But so far this year, there have been few problems with student irresponsibility, the janitors said.

All five agreed that good fringe benefits accompany custodial work.

"We get hospitalization, dental insurance, health insurance, retirement plans, and most holidays off," Beasley said.

"Not having to work weekends is also nice," Beck said.

"I enjoy cleaning," Brown said.

"The only thing I would change about my job is the pay," she added. "I'm behind in pay. Way behind," she said.

Custodial work also does not offer advancement or promotion.

"There's nowhere to go. Where are you going?" asked Beasley.

"We want to tough it out and hang in there," Garner said.

"We more or less take care of the school like we do our homes, and I think all my girls feel the same way," Garner said.

An atmosphere of use pervades J.H. House Elementary School, aged 19 years. Age does not imply a



Staff Photo by Kathryn Kolb

A CLEAN-CUT CREW: Left to right, Conyers Middle School custodians Jauneise Garner, supervisor, with Stephanie Harris and Flora Beck.



Staff Photo by Kathryn Kolb

PARTNERS IN CLEAN: A.C. Brown, left, and Bobbi Sparks describe J.H. House Elementary School from their vantage point as custodians.

lack of cleanliness, however.

Bobbi Sparks has been the informal supervisor of the day shift at J.H. House for five years. Betty Jean Brown has worked at the school for 18 of its 19 years, and Dollie Brown has been there almost 10 years.

The cleaning of J.H. House is a cooperative effort. No special rooms are assigned any particular janitor, according to Sparks.

fifth grade, is easier to clean than a school with a lot of older children, according to Sparks.

"I prefer this school to a school with older kids. The work is not as tiring," said Sparks, a veteran of Conyers Middle School.

"I've found that younger children appreciate you more. They look up to you," Sparks said.

"The older they get, the messier they are," Dollie Brown agreed. All three custodians believe their efforts are appreciated by the teachers and children.

"Our job is important to everyone," Sparks said.

"We are the beginning of the work here, making sure everything is kept clean for the teachers and children," she added.

Like other schools, J.H. House gets its heaviest cleaning during the summer.

"Without air conditioning," Betty Jean said.

To the aggravation of the crew, air-conditioning units are turned off during the hottest part of the year, leaving them to scrub, wipe, and polish in the summer heat.

"I fainted down here last summer, I didn't know where I was for a while," Dollie said.

Betty Jean Brown speculated the units were shut off to save energy.

"But how can you work in a hot building?" she asked.

"Having people walk on my wet floors" is also aggravating, Dollie Brown said. "It's mostly the grown folks that do it, too. Once somebody

breaks their leg, maybe they'll start walking around wet floors."

All agreed working with Joseph Well, the principal, was one of the great satisfactions of their jobs.

"I guess the main thing that has kept me here all these years is Mr. Well. He understands so much," Dollie Brown said.

"When it's time for the kids to leave, Mr. Well stands out there to see that every child gets home," Betty Jean said.

"It's like a family here, really," Sparks said.

Sparks believes the custodians should receive free lunches.

"Of course, if we say that, the teachers will say they should have free lunches too," she said.

"Maybe they should," Betty Jean said.

Rockdale County High School, a sprawling complex of older buildings, is maintained by day and night shifts of custodians, according to Macle Williams, day-shift supervisor.

Williams has overseen the cleaning of the school for six years. His night shift counterpart is Tommy Reynolds.

"He supervises about five people, and they do those areas which cannot be done with people present, such as halls and common areas," he said.

"We get great support from Mr.