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Working the late shift: Maintenance crew talks color-coded cleaning, tells tales of sights seen

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Photo by Stephanie Bathurst

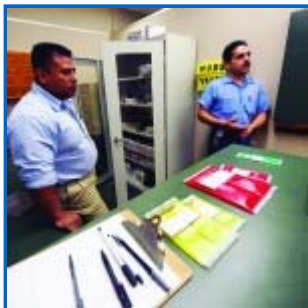
By Victoria Heckenlaible

Late-night building attendant Refugio Esqueveo peered over the metal railing down uniform stairs in the UT Administration Building before beginning to mop. The fluorescent lights bathed the entire staircase in an industrial glow.

"I always feel like I'm going to fall off these stairs," he said.

Esqueveo, who has been working at UT for 11 years, is part of the custodial staff that cleans the campus and its buildings from 5:30 p.m. to 2 a.m. Attendants start their shifts by signing in to receive building section assignments and chemical packets for cleaning. These building attendants concentrate on specific cleaning duties that rotate every three months from lights duties, vacuuming, cleaning restrooms and utilities work. This is a part of the team's effort to speed up the cleaning process and add variety.

UT also uses a unique custodial organization system called Operating System 1, which increases the pace, promotes efficiency and helps cut back on waste. Employees are given cards with an hourly schedule of where they are supposed to be in the cleaning process along with exact chemical rations in small colorful bags.



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Fidel Garcia, the building services supervisor, said he is proud that the University adopted this system, joining the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Michigan.

"Now everything is portioned out in the bags and we know exactly how much [of the] cleaning supplies each person is using,"

Garcia said. "We can look at an employee's card to find them instead of spending half our time looking for them."

When Garcia started working at UT nine years ago, the piles of plastic bags and cleaning chemicals that often went unused

Photo by Stephanie Bathurst

bothered him, he said. Then the University implemented Operating System 1 to save money and time and to be more environmentally safe.

"Most of the employees didn't like the change — no one ever likes change," Garcia said. "But then they starting liking it; the new system was faster-paced."

When the employees sign in, they receive a color-coded card with cleaning assignments and matching colored chemical packages: green for light cleaning, blue for vacuuming, pink for restrooms and yellow for utilities. Even the schedule on the dry erase board is color-coordinated.

Though the building attendant job is extremely organized and efficiently managed, the late-night hours give employees increased flexibility during the daytime.

"Most of us prefer the late-night hours, because it lets us do what we need to do [during the day]," Garcia said.

In some cases, the hours allow for the opportunity to have second job during the day.

Garcia said one UT building attendant only sleeps for three hours a night. The employee works at UT at night then drives to an Austin suburb for a daytime custodial position.

"I don't know how he does it," Garcia said. "And I don't know how my brother did it either — he worked two jobs for 12 years and finally had to cut down to just one."

For some of the attendants, an alternative to a second job is to sign up to work large UT events, which provide opportunities for extra hours on the weekends.

"Many of the employees try to work the big events," said building attendant leader Roberto Rodriguez. "It helps them make extra money."

As a building attendant leader, Rodriguez supervises teams of eight to 12 attendants, audits supply usage and keeps track of hours.

Even with the weekend opportunities and the flexibility of the late-night hours, the benefits can only last so long as workers get sick of working two jobs and others start families.

"I used to be fine with the hours, but now I have a daughter," Garcia said. "She's growing up and wants to spend time with us in the evenings."

Garcia is usually only able to spend 30 minutes with his daughter between the time she arrives home from school and he has to go to work.

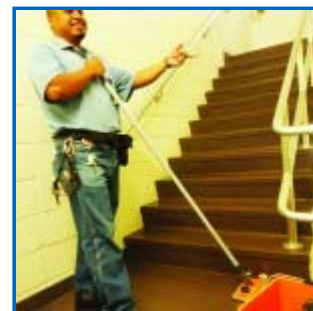
Outside of balancing work and home and other challenges that go along with their jobs, the late-night custodial employees have had some lighthearted and even bizarre moments working when no one else seems to be around campus.

"'Junior, Junior,' I kept hearing after I turned my lights off," said attendant Esquivio. "On the third time, I turned around and I saw a person crawling on the floor with no legs."

Esquivio said he stared in horror as the apparatus crawled closer and the blood pooled on his freshly cleaned floors. He finally snapped out of the vision as he began screaming, he said.

"I was terrified," Esquivio said. "I just took off running with my friend chasing after me."

When his friend caught up with him, he forced Esquivio to walk back to the spot in the original pharmacy building. But even with no blood or signs of the legless crawler, Esquivio still refuses to ever return.



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Photo by Stephanie Bathurst

Attendant leader Rodriguez has also had his share of interesting interactions. He said that at one point, he followed wet footprints every night over the course of several weeks around the Music Recital Hall building. Each time he followed the footprints they led to nothing, until finally he and a building attendant found the culprit.

"I swung open the restroom door to see a butt-naked man standing in front of the sink," Rodriguez said.

The man was bathing, splashing water from the running sink on himself and using the soap from the soap dispenser as a puddle of water formed around him. Rodriguez and the attendant then called UTPD to handle the situation.

From possible spirits to attempted bathroom sink baths, the late-night custodial crews have seen it all. The nocturnal hours are prone to unusual sightings and potential challenges that seem to affect the building attendants' and leaders' daily lives.

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