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4-15-2015

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STARS Citation

Dagenais, Todd (2015). Get to know the custodians. UCF Today, 2015-04-15. Retrieved from <https://today.ucf.edu/get-know-custodians/>

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Get to Know the Custodians

By Todd Dagenais
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, April 15, 2015

In 1996, I was fresh out of college living in Bay City, Michigan, and about to begin my first year as a paid volleyball coach. As many people in my situation, I was scared to death about my lack of experience and my potential inability to shape the hearts and minds of 15- to 18-year-old volleyball players. I began the process of asking experienced coaches for advice on how to approach my new endeavor.

Many coaches shared their wisdom on running tryouts, creating effective practices, and managing players' and parents' expectations.

One coach, however, gave me some golden advice that has stuck with me every day of my 20-year volleyball coaching career.

His words were simple: "Get to know the custodians."

The coaching profession is loaded with pitfalls and tribulations, but his advice was "get to know the custodians"?

This coach had won multiple titles, championships and coaching honors. He was a first-ballot Hall of Famer. There had to be something more to his advice than was I was hearing on the surface. I was just too young and inexperienced to really understand the underlying message.

During my first day of summer training, I walked around the hallways of Bay City Central High School. I found each of the three school custodians, introduced myself, and

told them that I was new to the area. Each day I would take a few minutes away from my duties to say hello to the custodians. In return, we would talk about the city, current events or the rich history of the school. These custodians were a wealth of knowledge to someone trying to find a foothold.

In 1997, I became a volunteer assistant at Michigan State University. In 1998, I became a full-time assistant at Northern Michigan University, and later that year I returned to Michigan State as a full-time assistant. Following the advice of my mentor, I learned the names of the custodians on each stop. However, I still didn't know the true meaning of "get to know the custodians."

Being a night owl, I would often be working the same time as the custodial crew. They would have frequent late-evening cookouts outside the athletics facility and invite me to grab a snack. I was even invited to play in their late-night floor hockey league. I learned more about the inner workings and politics of an athletic department from the custodial staff than I did from any other athletic department staff member.

This concept became crystal clear late in my first year at Michigan State. There was an office assistant who had been on staff for decades and several around the department thought she should have retired years earlier. Many others simply tried to ignore her due to her usual surly personality.

One day I was in a panic because I desperately needed the mail clerk to send a scouting video well after the deadline. I was asking anyone I could find to help me make this happen. "Too late," "He's already gone," and many other hopeless responses rang out from the offices.

Suddenly, the raspy old voice of that office assistant called me over to her desk. Having heard about her reputation, I was quite certain I was going to be scolded for making such a request.

"I'll take care of it, Todd," she said. Twenty minutes later, the video was picked up by the mail carrier to be sent.

I asked her how she made it happen. She said: “Simple, I bake him cookies for his children every few weeks.”

Nearly five years after receiving the “custodian” advice, I started to figure out the moral of the story. It wasn’t about just the custodians, it was about “the custodians.” She treated the mail carrier in a manner that he was willing to go out of his way to help her. I learned that he was helping her as her custodian, and she, in turn, was helping me as my custodian. Lesson learned.

We are all somebody’s custodian, and it’s extremely important to know who serves as our custodian every day. Maybe it’s the secretary, the mail carrier, the girl behind the counter at the coffee shop. Maybe it’s the ticket agent at the check-in counter, or the desk staff at the hotel, or maybe it’s the person who makes sure you have a clean office and empty garbage receptacle when you arrive in the morning.

Look into the truest definition of custodian and you will read: “a person who has custody, a keeper, a guardian.”

Robert and Thomas do a great job making sure my office is spotless, our bathrooms are ready for the president to walk in, our garbage is always picked up, and our volleyball floors are meticulously cleaned every evening. Yes, they are custodians and they take great pride in their job.

Besides those two special people, Meredith makes sure I eat; my wife, Katie, makes sure I sleep; Marie makes sure the mail gets picked up; Margaret makes sure our players are on track to graduate; Ben makes sure they stay strong; Keith makes sure they are preparing for life; Courtney makes sure I stay out of trouble; Michelle makes sure I stay on schedule; Brad makes sure we have what we need to be competitive; Mike and Marc makes sure the gym is ready; John makes sure the equipment is prepared and jerseys are clean; Melissa makes sure we are healthy; Al makes sure our computers are running virus-free.

Our volleyball program alone has dozens of “custodians.”

You need to find *yours*.

They may be in a back corner of the building, or a dimly lit, broom-closet-sized office. They may be from a different background from you. They may not even speak your language.

Meet them anyway. They could be the person who determines if you start your day stress-free, they may be the person who can bail you out of a tough situation, or they may even be the person who can influence if you will be a success or a failure in your job.

No matter where you work or what profession you are in, make a list of who they are, learn their names, and take time to “Get to know the custodians.”

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