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Monday Mornings in

HELL

The life of those who mop, mop, mop all day long.

Story by Katie Norris

It's 8:30 on a Monday morning, and Shirley Ross walks through Willow Hall with purpose, with a militant intensity. This grandma has seen a lot in her years as a custodian at Iowa State University, and she has a hard-won air of patience that comes with her decade of experience.

Ross turns down her walkie-talkie to point out a case of Miller Genuine Draft bottles to hall director Eric Mata. Pizza boxes litter the stairways, and graffiti is scrawled across the walls.

It's another typical Monday morning in the dorms, and custodians are taking stock after a long weekend of hard partying by students. This is the life of an ISU custodian. It is dirty. It is sickening. It is theirs.

"The students have been here," Ross says, gesturing to the darkened lights of the elevator. "They go in and loosen the light bulbs," she explains with a shrug, as if gave up trying to understand their motives years ago.

She shakes her head at Mata. "I watched case after case come in Friday," she says with a rueful grin, "There must have been enough beer here to float a battleship."

Inspections of the bathroom reveal aluminum cans glittering in the showers. On the eighth floor, the den furniture resembles a twisted jungle gym, and holes have been punched in the wall plaster on the fifth floor. Mata and Ross agree it's pretty tame for a Monday. In previous weekends, they've dealt with broken glass in bathrooms, fires in stairways and obscenities on walls.

"We've had reports they're taking the screens off and pissing out the windows," Ross says matter-of-factly. Mata nods. He does his tour with few comments about the state of affairs.

Ross stops to go into a bathroom, surprising a groggy woman brushing her teeth.

"Sorry to butt in. I just have to check it out," she says briskly. The young woman smiles around her toothbrush, and Ross adds, "It's cold out there. You'd better wear a jacket. Have a good day."

Back out in the hall, they look for further damage. Ross stoops to pick up a Snickers wrapper and then continues on, limping as she has done all morning.

This has been the worst year so far for cleaning the residence halls, she says. "I think we're seeing more beer drinking than we used to," Ross says. "It's always been there, but it's worse this year."

Walking on, she gestures to a Kleenex tacked to a dorm-room door. "Is that the new signal or something?" Mata shakes his head, hiding a smile. They're speaking of the longtime tradition of dormmates indicating from the outside that their roommate is not wanted on the inside because of romantic reasons. "I don't know what they are anymore. It used to be scars," Ross chuckles. "One guy used to hang his jock strap on the door handle; we always laughed about that."

She explains other genitalia-induced humor. "It goes in a big fad. Two years ago it was drawing penises in the hallway," she says. "Turned out to be a bunch of girls. Again, she shrugs at the inspiration of miscreants.

Ross shoots a sidelong glance at the hall director. "When girls are naughty, they're really naughty, right, Eric?" He lifts his shoulders in indifferent agreement, and they continue on their inspection.

Downstairs in the commons, Ross relates war stories with a rusty old chuckle. She shares her most disgusting experience, which involves a bulk of manure brought in by the students. "They covered a wall with it, smeared it on with their hands and left it in piles," she recalls with a grimace. "We had to clean it up and several people got sick. I mean, can you imagine cleaning that?"

Still, she credits students with their ongoing creativity. "Some stuff you just have to laugh at," she says.

Two years ago, "a guy put that spray caulk on a kid's door. It sealed right up, like cement," she tells Mata. "We had to chisel it off."

Ross gives equal parts credit for the students' inspiration to their own initiative and other

photos by Amy Schienbrock
condensing the movie in a viewpoint that few consider. "I think they got too damn many ideas from that movie," she says with a smile. "I wish they wouldn't have made it. People got too many ideas without adding to 'em."

Later, in the breakroom, Ross takes a chair and regards the room like a general returning from the front lines. The five Willow custodians rendezvous after completing the first set of their tasks for the day.

"Yeah, we tell a lot of stories," Ross says. "But we've got a lot to tell."

The room is filled with chairs. On the refrigerator is a stern warning about eating coworkers' food. Big no-no. The bulletin board at the end of the wall has sayings familiar in every workplace, such as educating people about the consequences of their lack of planning.

On closer inspection is a picture, slightly curled with age and secured by a thumbtack. "That's my favorite RA from a few years ago," volunteers Connie Sudborck, veteran Willow custodian. "I went to his wedding when he graduated," she says, smiling at the image.

The custodians are engaged in a conversation about the safety of storing bikes in dorm rooms. They had been informed by the fire marshal that it would be a hazard in the event of an emergency if students fled down the stairways with their most valued possessions. "Yeah, right," jokes one custodian. He drops his voice a register in an impersonation: "Grab the beer!"

Sudborck rides the elevator to the eighth floor, where the mangled den furniture has already been dissembled.

Sudborck cleans the bathrooms systematically. She pushes her hair out of her eyes with her rubber-gloved hands as she speaks. "This year it was fires in the bathrooms," she says, in between sprays of disinfectant. "Last year, on seventh floor, there was a cherry bomb in the stool. It cost $475 to replace it."

The bathrooms are easy for her to clean today — no used condoms or puke around the toilets.

"If you're nice to the students, they'll be nice to you," is Sudborck's motto, one she adheres to by making pleasant small talk with the students and RAs she encounters.

She says it's difficult to keep up with their names, since there are 60 students on each of her floors and only one of her. "The thing I like best about my job is interacting with the students," she says, wheeling her cumbersome cleaning cart through the halls. "Kids'll be kids, ya' know?" she explains patiently. "It's the upbringing that makes a difference. It's how they were brought up."

As residents begin to stream in from an afternoon of classes, Louis Lang, longtime Willow custodian, expresses his relaxed philosophy about dealing with students while shaking out a dust mop.

Lang pauses a moment, saying, "It doesn't matter to me how bad the kids are. I wouldn't have a job if the students weren't here." He takes his job with a grain of salt, keeping in perspective that this is a time when most students are sowing their wild oats.

"They're just kids, they haven't grown up yet," Lang explains, as the end of his eight-hour shift draws near. "They're like I used to be, go out and drink and party. They'll grow up and find out what it's really like. You gotta have a job to make it."

Meanwhile, the janitors toil in the background, doing their job, making it. The janitors toil in the background, doing their job, making it.

Katie Norris is a junior in journalism and mass communication.