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The public school custodian

by KEITH SCHELL

One day, while we were in grade seven in 1972, a couple of grade eight boys knocked on our classroom door, and when our teacher answered, I saw them in quiet conversation with her over something.

Then the teacher looked around our entire class, picked me and another guy, and told us to go with the grade eight kids. Apparently, they needed help with some sort of task.

As we walked with the grade eight kids, they explained why they wanted us. Their assigned task was winding down, and they needed someone to take over what they were doing starting next week for the rest of the year.

My friend and I were to raise the Canadian flag in front of the school, take the swing seats out to the playground every morning, and take all of it back in every afternoon before school ended!

COOL! The grade eight kids showed us where to go and what to do. When I saw where we had to go for this job, it got a whole lot more interesting.

My buddy and I were allowed to go into the places in the school where no other kid was allowed to go. The furnace room and all the other places behind the scenes. The forbidden zones, if you will. And for a kid who only got to go to class, the playground, and the washroom, this was pretty neat!

The next Monday morning and almost every morning after that, I got to school before the other guy did, so both tasks usually fell to me to complete. I went into the furnace room to begin my assigned duties.

When the door to the furnace room opened, I came face-to-face with the day shift custodian! I didn't know there would be anyone else in there besides myself. Startled, I introduced myself and told him why I was in there. We had a nice little chat, and then I carried out my assigned duties.

And every morning after that, I would go into the furnace room to perform my task, and before I left, I would always have a nice chat with the custodian. As we got to know each other, our chats became a bit lengthier and a lot more interesting.

Our best conversations were usually reserved for Monday mornings when we would dissect the Toronto Maple Leaf game on the Hockey Night in Canada broadcast from that past Saturday night. I always enjoyed our chats and looked forward to them every morning.

At the end of the school year, my task concluded and was not renewed for the following year. And as I grew up, I forgot about my youth as I went out and tried to make my way in the world.

Sometimes, you experience setbacks in your life, and after one such setback in 1982, I came back home for a while. I took a job at a local produce store to help me get back on my feet.

While I was working in the store one day, a gentleman saw me and came over and spoke to me. He seemed to know me, but I honestly didn't recall ever seeing him before. But as soon as he told me who he was, I warmed up to him right away.

It was the custodian's grown son! We had a brief chat about his Father, and he told me how much his Dad had enjoyed our little chats when I went into the furnace room to perform my task every morning. When he told me his Father had passed away, I was saddened by the news. We were always lessened as a town by the passing of good and decent people, and the custodian was

certainly one of those people to me. And I think of him fondly to this day.

Good and decent people do not always wear a suit; they often wear work clothes and carry a mop or a hammer. So, if you know of someone like that in your life, maybe buy them a coffee on International Custodian Appreciation Day (October 2nd) just to let them know they are appreciated.