

Props to the Unsung Heroes of Our Institutions

By Febin Bellamy, Georgetown University student

When I started attending Georgetown University in the fall of 2014, I had a rough transition, like many first-year students. I would often stay up until 3-4 a.m. in the business school, trying to catch up on homework and balancing a ton of extracurricular activities. During those late nights, I would often see the custodial staff walk through the empty hallways, take out the trash



in the bathrooms, vacuum the floors, and clean the offices and rooms that I used to study in.

Over time, I saw many of the other facilities staff who also play an important role in keeping our university running behind the scenes—each with their own personal story to tell. They include custodial, auxiliary, maintenance, and construction personnel, grounds maintenance crews, security guards, sanitation workers, and bus drivers, among others.

I made it a habit to always greet them if I passed them in the hallway. This included those who maintain the heating/cooling and electricity for every building on campus, as well as those who stay on campus for days during a snowstorm—away from

their families—just so that our streets are safe to walk on.

A SHOW OF APPRECIATION

Oftentimes, students, alumni, and professors receive a lot of recognition and appreciation, but I saw that appreciation for the facilities staff, who play such a vital role at our universities, was not as forthcoming. Yet, the institution would not be operating without these unsung heroes.

As I continued to get to know the facilities staff at Georgetown, I started taking notes on our conversa-

“Over 40 universities have reached out to start up their own chapters of Unsung Heroes!”

tions. I wanted to give back somehow, and as I got to know them on a personal level, I thought about sharing their stories with the rest of the Georgetown community.

Throughout the year, I interviewed over 100 of these men and women, and learned about their amazing stories. Many of them shared their experiences immigrating to the United States in hopes of a better life and opportunity. When asked about their most memorable moment at Georgetown, many of them would say that it was the one time when a student bought them a cup of coffee as a token of appreciation, or thanked them after they had spent 10-11 hours in the freezing cold, shoveling snow and cleaning up the streets.

Most importantly, I tried to highlight the life moments that brought these facilities workers to the

campus in the first place, and to learn more about what motivates them to come to work each day. The reasons are many—from paying for a child’s tuition, to their love for students, and serving others.

THE UNSUNG HEROES PROJECT IS BORN

From these efforts, *Unsung Heroes* [www.unsigned-hero.org] was born, promoting awareness and appreciation for the facilities staff on college campuses who keep their universities functioning behind the scenes, but are often unrecognized and unappreciated. Our goal is to break the ice by sharing their stories through photography, videography, and dialogue—in hopes of creating a stronger bond within the university community.

Also, by raising awareness and highlighting their dignity through their stories on social media, we encourage the community to give back to them in several ways, like service projects and crowd funding, which helps them to achieve their personal dreams. We aim to unify the campus community by inspiring others to get to know the individuals who play such an important—but often unknown—role in maintaining their institutions.

MAKING A REAL IMPACT

Over time, we have found that this project has had an impact on our school and opened the door for communication, appreciation, and a glimpse into the human spirit.

- We have reached millions of viewers through our numerous press features, and are inspiring people around the world to acknowledge and appreciate the unsung heroes in their communities. Even a simple handshake or a thank you can go a long way.
- Over 40 universities have reached out to start up their own chapters of *Unsung Heroes*! They include the University of California Los Angeles, New York University, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, University of Notre Dame, University of Maryland, Howard University, George Washington University, Columbia University, and Harvard University.
- Facilities staff are benefiting from the events and stories we share on our social media sites. Some say that they become like mini-celebrities after the story gets shared. People are starting to acknowledge them and thank them for their service to our communities. This kind of response is



An *Unsung Heroes* Appreciation Breakfast is well received and attended.



what really inspires me to keep on going with the project.

- In the process of featuring Umberto “Suru” Ripai, a food service worker who swipes our meal cards at the Georgetown Dining Hall, we learned that he hadn’t visited his home country, Sudan, in over 45 years. After students heard his story, we set up a GoFundMe account to pay for a round-trip ticket so he could see his family, and raised over \$5,400 in just a few days. This story has been shared over 1,000 times on Facebook and received over 1,500 “likes.” (<https://www.gofundme.com/Unsung-Heroes>)

The *Unsung Heroes* website is full of photos and testimonials attesting to the growth and warm reception this project has had.

BREAKING BARRIERS AND MAKING CONNECTIONS

When we published our first posts on social media in April 2016, we received great feedback from students on campus who were thankful to us for raising awareness. Many of the students empathized with the stories, especially those about the men and



Founder Febin Bellamy (far left) joins students offering their thanks to the Unsung Heroes at Georgetown University.

women they interact with on a daily basis. Student groups began to reach out to us to request collaboration projects, and we received tons of positive emails and messages of support from students, parents, administrators, and alumni alike.

This approach allowed us to break the barrier between the worker and the student. It resonated with people by capturing the worker's humanity through a compelling photograph, or a quote about something that reflected who they are as individuals.

Regardless of skin color or socioeconomic background, people connect to stories. Even if we share a story with a person who doesn't have a similar background to the worker, we often still manage to strike an emotional chord by virtue of our shared humanity. 💡

Febin Bellamy is a business management student at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and the founder of Unsung Heroes. He can be reached at fjb35@georgetown.edu, this is his first article for *Facilities Manager*. For more information about the Unsung Heroes Project, visit <https://www.facebook.com/unsung.heroes.organization>.

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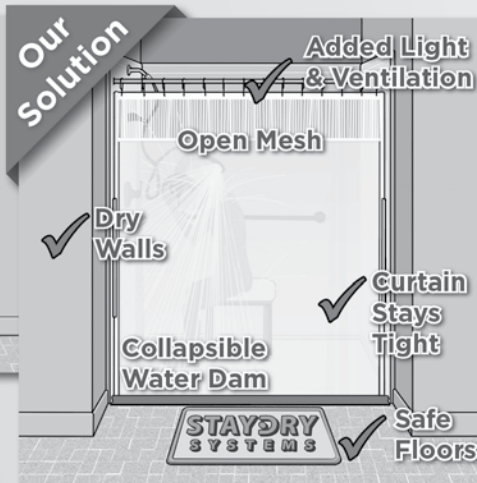
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