

https://www.hoosiertimes.com/reporter_times/a-man-for-all-seasons-janitor-celebrates-40-years-at-paragon-elementary/article_bf30d3ee-028f-5dc9-b615-76e5498ab41e.html

A man for all seasons: Janitor celebrates 40 years at Paragon Elementary

By Andrew Crowley acrowley@reporter-times.com

Oct 13, 2018



Paragon Elementary head custodian Kenny Beaman smiles as he walks into a classroom. He was told over the radio that a teacher was in need of assistance. In reality, it was just an excuse to get Beaman to visit a room so that students could read him cards they'd made in recognition of his 40 years of service at the school.

Photo courtesy of Tiffany Oswalt

PARAGON — Kenny Beaman has been a fixture at Paragon Elementary School since 1978.

His father was head custodian at the time, and he worked with his father for the next 19 years. He also attended Paragon for fifth and sixth grade, a fact that surprises some students.

"Now the kids really think that's something," said Beaman, now in his 60s. "They'll look at me like, 'Wow, you're old.'"

After his dad retired, he took over his father's job, but the experience of working alongside his father is something Beaman relishes.

"We had a lot of good times. And we used to kid and cut up, and if he wanted something done, he didn't have to gripe at me to get it done, I just done it," Beaman said.

After becoming head custodian, he moved to the day shift, which is when he began interacting a lot more with students and staff. It's one of the many reasons he's become so beloved at the school.

Cindy Schneck, a secretary at Paragon, has worked with Beaman for 18 years. She spoke highly about his positive attitude and willingness to help others.

"He is just always ready to help anyone and everyone, no matter what the problem is. If he's asked for help, he's always ready to give a solution or solve the problem or take care of it with no hesitation on his part," Schneck said.

Paragon principal Tiffany Oswald echoed Schneck's comment about Beaman willingness to help others.

"One of our teachers had a flat tire the other day, and he went ahead and helped her change that," Oswald said. "So those are some of the things that he would just do daily for teachers or parents that would come. He would go above and beyond to help them any way he can."

That's why it was so important for the students and staff of Paragon to recognize and celebrate Beaman for his 40 years of service to the school. They surprised him with a party and cards created for him by students earlier this month.

"It's such an accomplishment to stay at a place for 40 years and be successful in your job. So we really wanted to celebrate him. Let him know that he's appreciated," Oswald said.

Beaman for his part was very touched by the gesture.

"It was just something else. Like they had angel food cake, cookies and balloons in the teacher's lounge," Beaman said. "All the teachers was in there and they just made that the best day of my life. Like all the kids made me cards, and they was so nice."

Schneck is a member of the school's social committee and helped to plan the festivities.

"We just wanted to make sure that he received acknowledgment that he was deserved, and we decided just to have a little get together with the staff," Schneck said. "And upon knowing how much he loved the kids here, we thought that it would be fun to receive cards from all of the children."

Oswald said they surprised Beaman with the cards by telling him a teacher needed assistance.

"We would tell him that there was snow falling in the windows and that the classroom teacher really needed him to help out because there was so much snow coming in," Oswald said. "We would just say jokes like that to get him to go to the classroom where the kids would surprise him and give him the cards."

Oswald said that there were some students who didn't quite understand what they were celebrating.

"I heard some of the kids say 'Happy birthday' to him because they didn't really understand the 40-year anniversary, but they knew that they were excited for him somehow," Oswald said.

Beaman is tremendously beloved by the students at Paragon, when they see him students are quick to say hello. He builds a rapport with them as they pass each other in the hallway.

"I like to kid with them, and they like to kid with me back," Beaman said.

That kidding involves playful teasing. He calls them "meanness" and "trouble," and the kids will do the same back to him.

"We just kind of kid with each other and things like that. Like if they're coming down the hallway, I'll chase them with a broom or something. And they really enjoy that," Beaman said.

Some kids are shyer than others. Beaman said that there are some he can't even talk to without them crying. He works to put them at ease, he smiles at them and talks to them a little bit and then leaves them alone for a little while.

"Then they'll get used to me, and then they'll come back and start talking," Beaman said.

Beaman's favorite part of the school year is the first semester, especially December. That's when he has the most fun.

"I really have a lot of fun with them little kids around Christmas. I can get them to be good. When they're being bad, I'll say, 'Santa's watching you,' and then they'll straighten up," Beaman said.

One time, he wore a hat that had lights on it and a star on top that flashed. He told students that it was Santa's radar and that they were on a big screen television at the North Pole.

"And I had them little kids waving at it. They thought they was on a big screen television," Beaman said.

Though head custodian is his title, Beaman fills many roles at Paragon.

"I'm a dad, psychiatrist, doctor, nurse and all of it. If they need a Band-Aid, I'll go take them to the clinic. I kid with them over that," Beaman said. "If one of them comes up to me with a cut on his hand, I'll say, 'I'm a surgeon, I do surgery.' They'll look at me kind of funny, 'No, you're not.'"

Psychiatrist might be his most important role, students feel comfortable opening up to him — a stable figure during times of instability outside of school.

"If their parents have a fight or a falling out, they'll tell me all about it," Beaman said. "If a kid comes up and hugs me, that's a sign that their parents are divorced or separated. And nine times out of 10, that's right."

It makes him feel good to give students a little bit of comfort during a difficult period in their lives, and he does his best to help students through their struggle.

"I talk to them a little bit. They're pretty depressed. They'll kind of liven up a little bit," Beaman said.

The students show their appreciation for Beaman in other ways, like giving him cupcakes and cookies and by creating art for him.

"I've got a drawer full at home. They draw me stuff at Christmas and just because they felt like it. I always take it," Beaman said.

Beaman never married or had children of his own, so in a way, he plays the role of surrogate grandfather to the students at Paragon. And he loves them dearly, as if they were his own.

Sometimes, when the students are in high school, they'll return to visit. He doesn't always recognize them, because they've grown a lot since elementary school.

"And then they'll tell me their name and I'll remember," Beaman said. "And I'll especially remember the troublemakers."

Those interactions can make Beaman feel his age, but at the same time, it's something that's validating. It means he made a positive impact on them.

"It makes me feel old and kind of makes me feel good that they still like me, stuff like that. Their parents, they love that, when the kids come back to me like that," Beaman said. "I kid and cut up with the parents, too. And they're about like the kids, they're just big kids like me. I'm just a big kid, I get around these little kids, I just turn into one."

The summer is a time when custodians and maintenance work to clean schools and get them ready for the following school year, it's also a time of a little sadness for Beaman.

"I miss them like everything, about the second week of (summer vacation), it's just like a morgue in here. It's quiet. We get a lot done when they're not here, but I'd rather have them here. I'd much rather have them here," Beaman said.

Forty years is a long time to work anywhere and Beaman shows no sign of stopping. He plans to keep working as long as he can because he loves his job so much, all the people — the students, staff and others — make it worthwhile. No day is the same and that keeps it fresh.

"I love the kids and the teachers. They make it very nice for me and I got a nice principal," Beaman said. "And I just love it."