Thomas Davis, 55, sweeps his mop in long, rhythmic strokes across the tiled first floor of St. Michael’s College’s Jeanmarie Hall. His movements are slow and methodical. As Davis works on the floors, professors and students pass, heading from class to class. Some of these passers-by apologize to Davis or move towards the walls. He tells them, “It’s ok,” only ever so briefly pausing his long, slow, mop-strokes.

Davis has been a custodian at the college for 33 years. His work includes cleaning 21 offices on the second floor of Jeanmarie twice per week, cleaning two bathrooms in St. Edmund’s Hall each morning, and cleaning 14 classrooms in Jeanmarie.

“If you want to do it right, it takes 14 minutes [per classroom],” Davis said. Since the night shift was cut, and because he starts the day at 5 a.m., he only has about seven minutes to clean each room before classes begin at 8 a.m. This has made the shift to daytime work a challenge. “You gotta get the stuff off the rugs, dump the trash, and clean the marker boards. It takes time.”

In August, St. Michael’s College eliminated its custodial night shift and transitioned to two daytime shifts to improve efficiency and concentrate the full workforce to daytime hours, said James Farrington, the director of facilities and architect at the college. Seventeen custodians were affected by the schedule change.

The Defender shadowed three custodians to learn more about their stories. During this time, they shared the changes and challenges that came from the schedule shift, as well as from the work itself.

“Night and Day:”

John Waldron, 62, the supervisor of the early shift custodial team, said that the switch from nighttime to daytime work has come with both positives and negatives. According to Farrington, the transition had its challenges. “It was painful getting through the process,” he said. “[However,] the quality of our work has gone up.”

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Custodians
CONTINUED FROM AI

negatives. “We certainly have a harder time getting the school ready for day-time activities,” he said.

“On the other hand we get to interact with individuals who are here during the day which we never did before.”

For students, faculty, and staff at the college, it also puts faces to one of the more critical roles of keeping the institution running smoothly.

Tight schedules:

Back in the halls of Jeanmarie, Davis said he works 40 hours per week at an hourly rate, with some healthcare and retirement benefits in addition to 30 days paid time off. He cleans Monday through Friday from 5 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. before heading back to his mobile home located near Cumberland Farms at the edge of the college’s campus. Davis struggles with his vision so he has to walk to work or get a ride from one of his coworkers. “I’m registered blind by the state of Vermont, but it’s basically borderline,” he said. “It’s just enough that I can’t drive.” He walks to campus in snowstorms when he cannot get a ride. “In the last 10 years I’ve called out [sick] about four days,” he said.

At his mobile home, Davis goes to bed around 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. to wake up at 12 a.m. He said it is a six-hour schedule adjustment he made to enable a balance between work and his hobbies. “I want to watch my prime time shows and residential halls of the college at 5 a.m. He said that as a former worker of the night shift, it was a definite adjustment.

“Now that our schedule got flopped all around it makes some things harder to do,” Wolcott said. “It’s a challenge, but I don’t look at it that way. I know what’s got to be done and I do it.”

Wolcott said working the day shift at the college means he has to work around students. “Most of them aren’t too bad, some of them go on by and say nothing. The bigger share of them are polite – they say ‘excuse me’ and stuff.” He said that many students are busy with homework so he gets as much as he can clean without disturbing their studies.

On a recent morning, Wolcott was busy cleaning the first floor of Dion so that he could get up to the Roy Room to prepare the space for an 8 a.m. event. Normal duties for Dion include dust mopping, using a machine to wash the floors, and wet mopping any areas the machine cannot reach. Wolcott zipped around the large space grabbing trash bags that overflowed with Einstein’s food and dripped orange liquid. He swept up piles of dirt into long, thin, lines that looked like a bird’s-eye view of mountain ridges -one of which produced a writhing stink bug. His no-nonsense manner and focus made it all seem routine.

Reactions to the change:

Farrington said that he has heard only positive reactions to the change in shifts and that it allows the custodians to build a more cohesive team. “The night stuff was very isolated. They didn’t get to come to speakers
Each morning, Shery Taft, 54, enters the entrance level of the library. 

"Then I go and clean four bathrooms, take the trash out, vacuum, thoroughly," Taft said. "It's very physical work," she said. "You're on your toes moving around, which is good." Taft cleans the library with one other custodian or sometimes alone if he is needed elsewhere.

Taft said her job has changed with the cut of the night shift. "We can't do a really thorough job like we want to... because classes are going, or people are coming in and you can't really be in their way," Like Davis and Wolcott, Taft said she has had more interactions with students now that she works during the day. "You actually get to see the day-to-day, the kids, and the students, but does have a "roly poly" dog named Frankie.

"I know what's got to be done and I do it." -Dennis Wolcott, custodian

During the day. "Generally they're pretty good kids. Sometimes you get a little 'oh what'd you do that for' but you say 'okay' and you keep on going." Taft works alongside her husband David Taft, 57. She said they have always worked together. Mr. Taft has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which makes his job difficult. "He's doing his best," Taft said. "He's doing alright." The couple has no children, but does have a "roly poly" dog named Frankie.

"You actually get to see the day-light," Taft said about now working the day shift, and explained that she can now go grocery shopping and make afternoon appointments.

She said she likes the flexibility of her job. "They [her supervisors] don't care how you do your work as long as it gets done." While she does not attend events at the college, she now has time to go to BINGO, and to have summer bonfires in her yard. "On the weekends we come alive," Taft said.

What's in the dorms? 

While the shift to days has offered a new challenge, some of the difficult elements of custodial work have nothing to do with the time of day. Wolcott detailed a time he had to clean vomit off the stones outside the entrance to the Dion Student Center. "The college can't just leave that stuff. Somebody has to clean it up, and that just happened to be me," he said. He said he is "not thrilled" about this kind of task, but that accidents happen.

Other messes, he said, are not accidents. Davis said he often picks up beer bottles from the classrooms after the weekend and that "quite regularly" he finds the trash cans in multiple classrooms filled with urine. "This is something that has been ongoing," he said.

Waldron said that despite its challenges, he enjoys his job. "It gets a little tougher as years go by," he said. "I enjoy being around students...it's the thing that keeps me coming." Davis, has seen a lot of students in his 33 years. As he moves through Jeanmarie Hall pushing his mop across the tiles, he smiles and nods as people pass him.

He pauses to say, "I do it for the college."