The (Other) Crew Captain

by John A. La Rue '07

Knock on the door. Wait. Insert key, turn. Open slightly.

“Dorm Crew.”

No one is home. This is a relief, as always. I locate the bathroom. I set down my bucket and mop, and get to work. Shower, toilet, sink, mirror, floor—this is my job.

I work for Dorm Crew, a student-run, student-staffed division of the University’s Facilities Maintenance Operations. We clean almost all the private bathrooms in the Houses and the Yard. The job pays well, and I find it oddly soothing. It’s a time to let the constant buzzing of schedule and schoolwork fade into the background, and turn my mind to anything or nothing. There’s a sort of Zen to cleaning a toilet, the porcelain smoothly curved beneath the sponge.

Sinks take a while, always dusted with a light film of soap or toothpaste. A few precise swipes restore this one to a satisfying shine. I slap a yellow Post-it on the wall. “Dorm Crew was here,” it says, “Your bathroom was cleaned by: John.” I back out of the bathroom, mopping.

And then I am gone. It takes me 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the shower. Then it’s onward again, to the next room, where once again I knock, hoping no one will be home.

I hear the scrape of a chair and footsteps.

The door opens. “Hi,” I say, “Mind if I clean your bathroom?”

It’s always an awkward moment when someone is home. Somehow, we are not equals when I’m wearing latex gloves. “Uh, sure,” he says, backing uncertainly into his room, nudging loose boxes out of the way with his foot. I head straight for the bathroom. He hovers. “Oh, sorry,” he mumbles, dodging past me to scrape together a towel, some boxers, and a couple old newspapers. He’s one of the nicer customers, uncertain about how to deal with someone cleaning for him. His uncertainty emerges as embarrassment, which only amplifies the tension for both of us. We both know that I am about to thoroughly inspect his most private space. I may work for him,

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but he is the one who feels vulnerable.

“No problem,” I smile, “I’ll be through in a few minutes.” I shut the door gently. Alone again, everything goes smoothly. His shower is tidy, though the top of the sink is littered with loose objects that I move to the window sill. I wonder what he was so anxious about; there is nothing more unusual here than a toothbrush decorated with cartoon elephants. I guess I am more accustomed to the interaction than he is. He sees a worker once every two weeks, if he is home at the right times, but I’ve walked in and out of strangers' rooms every week for the last two years.

These days, I am a captain, and spend my time in the office or the chemical room setting up for other people to clean. I hardly ever make it into bathrooms anymore. Aside from the two Head Captains in charge of the overall program, there are 11 “Full Captains,” each responsible for cleaning a House or the freshman dorms in the Yard. Not every House contracts with Dorm Crew, and we don’t clean all the bathrooms, but altogether we are in charge of cleaning 1,005 of them on a two-week cycle.

I oversee 15 workers cleaning private bathrooms in the Yard. Some dorms, like Thayer, Canaday, or Stoughton, have common bathrooms along the corridors. These are cleaned by full-time Harvard staff. I’m charged with the care of 102 bathrooms that are actually located within freshman suites in Pennypacker, Wigglesworth, and the other dorms. I have responsibility. I have power. I have business cards. I worked for Dorm Crew since my first day on campus, when I arrived for Fall Clean-Up in 2003.

Fall Clean-Up (FCU) is advertised as the only orientation program that pays students, instead of the other way around. It might more accurately be called an initiation program, considering the intensity through Johnston Gate. The dazzle of tangible history, of vicarious fame and power and importance, shines in freshman eyes as they step up to our registration tables in the shade of Weld Porch.

For many, these are the first truly independent steps, leaving their parents standing at the bottom of the stairs as they fill out their own working papers. Some parents can’t take it. They hover anxiously at the student’s elbow, jumping in to answer questions or bring out a passport. “She has a dentist appointment on Friday,” one father explains, as if his daughter were not present. As a matter of routine, the captain replies, all absences have to be cleared with the Head Captains. The father’s spine stiffens. Outrage! He marches off to the main office to demand that his daughter be excused Friday morning, because he is Class of ’67 and a lawyer and he lived in these dorms. The dentist appointment, of course, is fine.

Such concerned parents usually wind up at our question-and-answer information session, though I’m not sure whether they arrive of their own volition or if students purposely send their parents there as a form of day care. The normal questions of pay rate, overtime, and promotion always arise, but this year someone discovered one of the small secrets of dorm crew. We have tried to keep the existence of the Lamp Crew quiet, so that parents don’t try to lobby for their child to be among the 11 students who assemble and deliver lamps instead of doing the dirtier work of sweeping and scrubbing.
The answer, to my mind, is “Yes, of course it’s unfair.” I’m not entirely sure it’s easier or nicer; the one worker this year who had a chance to transfer into the Lamp Crew explained that his “three-hour experience with Lamp Crew made me much more appreciative of the ‘normal’ Dorm Crew work.” Certainly it is a vastly different experience, and selection is arbitrary. The Lamp Crew is based entirely on last name—just 11 consecutive names on the alphabetical list. Essentially, the least significant of heritable traits determines whether you will spend your week with hands in dirty water or not.

But this is not entirely different from the rest of the world. At the end of the week, some students, like me, will choose to continue working for Dorm Crew during the semester. Others will not. This decision, too, is in many ways determined by your last name. The financial needs of college students still depend on mom and dad. If mom and dad provide pocket money, well, why work? One girl arrived at FCU this fall sporting a Coach bag and diamond bracelets. I later asked one of her co-workers about that first day, and he recalled thinking, “Okay, she comes from somewhere very, very, nice. Not like me.” Small surprise—she decided not to continue work during the term; he did.

Not all of us are working to meet financial-aid obligations, but the whole program (I learned from research by former Dorm Crew member Zachary Gingo ’98) was founded in 1951 to supplement the GI Bill by providing income for working-class students and even today, every time the College expands its aid packages, our participation rates decline. Crossing through common rooms and bedrooms filled with obvious wealth—plasma-screen TVs, three feet wide, brand-new leather couches, designer clothes strewn around—it’s hard to ignore the gulf between my own experience and the apparent lifestyles of a considerable number of my fellow undergraduates.

This gulf becomes more obvious at the end of each year, in the week between exams and Commencement. All the freshmen and the sophomores and the juniors have packed up and moved out, while the seniors laze about on the grass in the courtyards, throwing exorbitant parties and savoring their last irresponsible moments before the real world. During this week, we of Dorm Crew must clean the leftover rubble out of the 2,621 suites composed of 4,774 rooms, and make 3,296 beds to lodge the rush of alumni back for their reunions.

The week never fails to astonish me. Some rooms, like mine, are desolate: nothing left but heaps of papers and piles of dust that inspire hollow vows to vacuum more often next year. Other rooms look as if some extraordinary slob might still be living there: pizza boxes litter the floor, bottles march across coffee tables and window sills in varying degrees of emptiness. It is not unusual to find the leather couches that mildly unnerved me during the term still sitting there, abandoned at the end of the year like the red plastic cups scattered around. Futons by the dozen, lamps, printers, speakers—all tossed aside, not worth the time and effort it would take to pack and store them. We captainsberry off the salvageable items among our crews as a way of rewarding the sweat and swearing it takes to ease a couch down narrow stairwells. What isn’t carried off by workers, we load onto trucks. Next fall, volunteers will sell it back to other students, with the profits benefiting Habitat for Humanity. As we pack truckload after truckload, I wonder, who are these people, who year after year can afford to toss away gadgets and furniture that I’m too cheap to buy at all?

Yet these are my peers. Sometimes I can pick out a particular person, from a class or a club, and think to myself, there’s one who will toss aside his speakers, or her scanner. The gap between what I know and what they take for granted catches me by surprise, and their frame of mind entirely astonishes me. In my section for Moral Reasoning 22, “Justice,” we were talking one day about city workers who do dangerous construction below ground. Someone suggested that such dangerous jobs should get higher pay, but—because people need those jobs to get by—the wage stays unfairly low. “I dunno,” said a guy across from me. “There are other jobs that are really risky. Like hedge-fund managers.”

Although I will forever remember his comment, such dramatic incidents are rare. The students whose bathrooms I clean sit in the same lectures and sections, complain about the same exams, live in the same House, and I never notice. I took a course in French-English translation last year, a class so small that we five students met in the professor’s office. We grew comfortable around one another as the semester progressed, making jokes and flipping easily between languages. That April, I knocked on a door in Kirkland and discovered that one of my classmates lived in a room I had cleaned all year, a room I recognized as the one with the floral bath mat and the cute notes to Sara-bear stuck on the mirror.

“Oh,” she said, taken aback, “Do you work Dorm Crew?”

“Yeah,” I replied, equally flustered.

I didn’t resent cleaning her bathroom, which was always a tidy one, but my comfortable anonymity had been ripped away. As odd as it feels to be completely ignored as you pass through the sightlines of four roommates intent on their group Nintendo game, the intermingling of manual labor and classroom interactions was somehow worse. Everyone knows that some students work hard every day just to be here, and others don’t. It’s just a lot more comfortable when we don’t have to confront the personal realities of that gap. It’s a lot more comfortable when I knock and no one’s home.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow John A. La Rue ’07 could tell hundreds of stories about Dorm Crew, but would rather hear yours. He credits coping with contingencies and personnel for Dorm Crew with providing the most pertinent training for his volunteer work on political campaigns.