

Custodian says candid talk on job led to firing

By Chris Bouneff
Emerald Reporter

A former University custodian said he was fired by the Physical Plant for speaking out on the lack of professional cleaning on campus.

Ramon Contreras was dismissed last Wednesday after a meeting with Theodore Burns, Physical Plant assistant director, and Eric Buckles, employee relations manager for the University's human resources office.

During the meeting, Burns and Buckles told Contreras he was being fired because he didn't meet the Physical Plant's expectation of what a janitor should be, Contreras said.

"They said they were looking for a certain type of custodian and that I wasn't it," Contreras said.

Contreras said the trouble with the Physical Plant started several months ago when he started complaining about the lack of cleaning being done in University offices.

He also said he upset his supervisors by doing extra work not contained in his job description.

"The system they have does not allow custodians to clean the building properly," Contreras said.

While at Oregon Hall, Contreras tried to answer complaints contained in a log book requesting custodians to clean

specific items, most notably the first floor women's bathroom, he said.

Contreras said he only wanted to do the cleaning properly, but his supervisors and the Physical Plant wanted him to concentrate on vacuuming and emptying trash cans.

"I was told not to worry about the complaints, but when I was suspended that was one of the things they used against me," Contreras said.

At the meeting with Burns and Buckles, Contreras presented a stack of letters from people in offices he had cleaned, Contreras said.

One of the letters was from W.T. Lemman, executive vice chancellor for the OSSHE, in which Contreras was described as "one of few people assigned to this building ... who have done more than the absolute minimum of emptying waste baskets and vacuuming."

Both Burns and Buckles declined to comment on the reasons Contreras was fired.

Contreras said Burns and Buckles told him the letters of recommendation were irrelevant to his firing.

"They were letters from people who were appreciative of the good work I've done, and they told me it was irrelevant to the subject at hand," Contreras said.

Helen Stampe, who works in the OSSHE academic affairs office in Susan Campbell Hall,

also wrote a letter of support for Contreras.

"I appreciated his work," Stampe said. "He did a lot of extra work — really minute things but it does make a difference."

"He (Contreras) would wash down the walls and do general dusting," she said. "Usually we do our own dusting and half the time we do our own vacuuming."

Stampe said she was surprised at the minimal amount of work the Physical Plant custodians do.

"A lot of the time the waste-baskets aren't emptied and the bathroom isn't cleaned," she said. "They just touch the top and that's it. We shouldn't have to dust our own office or clean our bathroom."

Though Burns would not comment on Contreras' firing, he did comment on the system the Physical Plant has switched

to for cleaning campus buildings.

"The new system is just getting started, and we're having a problem getting enough people," Burns said.

Burns said confusion about the new system is one reason why some areas aren't being cleaned, but Stampe said her office has never been properly cleaned except by Contreras.

Contreras said he attempted to work within the Physical Plant by requesting materials to clean certain areas complained about, but he was told he couldn't have the materials.

He then bought his own supplies to clean these areas as a matter of pride in his work, he said.

"Once I got my own supplies and I was told to share them," Contreras said. "It's discouraging to have to leave and the building is still dirty."

"I cleaned the bathroom (in

Oregon Hall) and the supervisor told me not to do that, then I was told it was okay and they didn't give me the proper supplies to do the job," he said.

The log book at Oregon Hall was started in December in response to the shabby work being done by the Physical Plant custodial staff, said a first floor employee wishing anonymity.

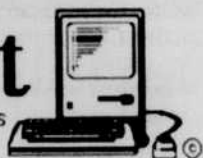
The source said most of their requests have been ignored or half-heartedly undertaken. The requests were for routine work that would be expected of a custodian such as properly cleaning the bathroom and emptying the trash, the source said.

When Contreras was assigned to Oregon Hall, he immediately answered the complaints by cleaning the women's bathroom.

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