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## Finding Wisdom, Philosophers in 'Unlikely Places' Two university custodians star in feature-length documentary

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By Michael Stratford



*Over there: The Philosopher Kings, a documentary about custodians from universities around the country, starred two Cornell custodians: Jim Evener (left) and Gary Napieracz (second from left). The film was screened in Bailey Hall yesterday.*

It was a unique and powerful moment in Bailey Hall yesterday afternoon.

An audience that filled nearly half the auditorium had the opportunity to see someone “invisible.”

No, they didn't catch a glimpse at the ghosts of A.D. White or Ezra Cornell. Rather, they saw projected on a screen in front of them footage of a Cornell custodian cleaning the floors of the very auditorium in which they sat.

Their interaction with Jim Evener didn't stop there, though. What followed was a compelling journey that took the audience through the intimate details of his life — from his custodial work at Cornell to the painfully abrupt end of his marriage to lying in a Japanese jungle for days after being shot in the back during the Vietnam War.

Filmmakers Patrick Shen and Greg Bennick call this connection between the audience and Evener an example of going from living in a two-dimensional world to living in a three-dimensional one.

As they explained yesterday at the kick-off of the national tour of their documentary, *The Philosopher Kings*, it's the difference between living life without noticing those who may be “invisible” and enriching one's human experience by genuinely connecting with others.

*The Philosopher Kings* is a compelling film that follows the lives of eight university custodians, two of whom — Evener and his colleague Gary Napieracz — work at Cornell.

The film opens with scenes of the custodians at their job, completing ordinary tasks like restocking restrooms with toilet paper to emptying office trash containers.

But the custodians quickly become well-developed characters. There is Princeton custodian Josue Lajeunesse, who has a second job as a taxi-cab driver in order to support the children, nieces and nephews whom he rarely has the opportunity to visit in an impoverished village in Haiti.

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The thesis of the film is simple but powerful: “finding wisdom in unexpected places,” and one doesn’t have to look far to see pearls of wisdom that emerge from the custodians’ stories.

“It’s a miracle that life exists – even if this is the only place in the universe that it exists. Whether that’s religious or not, I think it’s incredible. And I’m very happy to have this opportunity to experience it, even if it’s painful,” says Corby Baker, a custodian at Cornish College of the Arts, who had a troubled childhood but now uses the creative energy at the arts school to inspire his personal artistic endeavors that are chronicled in the documentary.

Oscar Dantzler, who serves as the custodian of a Duke University chapel and is a mentor to many of the hundreds of students at the university, discusses the pride he takes in keeping the chairs in the chapel aligned straightly.

“Nobody can straighten them like me,” he says. “I can do it with my eyes closed. It’s an old saying in my family: “If you can’t keep the house of God clean, you can’t keep no house clean. This is my heart and soul. I would work in no other building.”

Melinda Augustus, a custodian at the University of Florida, where she cleans a museum of natural history, explains how her work there opened her eyes to so many things, including the beauty and simplicity of butterflies.

In one of the most emotional storylines of the film, Augustus recalls a painful childhood experience. While her mother was in the hospital to deliver her 15th child, a hospital mistake with anesthesia put her mother into a coma, where she remained for 11 years until her death.

At a question-and-answer session in Bailey Hall yesterday, Augustus, like many of the other custodians, said they were at first reluctant to disclose such personal details but found the experience of sharing worthwhile.

“It was very scary for me at first, being private and having a private family. I thought: wow. What did I do?” she said. “I viewed this as part of my healing process. It’s also a great joy. It’s different but joyful. I feel good about what I’ve done.”

In addition to feeling moved, there was also a palpable sense of pride for the two Cornell custodians, Evener and Napieracz, featured in the film.

The scenes of Evener and Napieracz working in the hallways of Goldwin Smith Hall and at the Vet College brought a sure sense of relatability to the movie for the students, local Ithacans, Cornell staff and several administrators in attendance.

Director of Building Care Rob Osborn called the film one of the “most significant” things that he had seen done for custodial service workers at Cornell and around the country in his career.

It also appeared that at least one student in the audience took the “finding wisdom in unlikely places” theme of the movie to heart.

As a freshman at Cornell, the student asked of the custodians: “What advice do you have for me?”

“I would hate to be transferred up to Cornell to see you do anything but hittin’ books,” Dantzler retorted.

Lajeunesse, who in addition to supporting only his family in Haiti has developed and helped fund a program to bring running water to a village without clean drinking water, responded to the student: “There are millions here who want to be here at Cornell. They don’t have the chance. You have the chance. Don’t play with it. The first thing in life is discipline. Always be who you are. What you do for yourself.”

Asked why the producers chose university custodians to profile, “Intelligence is not exclusive to classrooms,” Shen, the movie’s director, said. “We feel like there is very little done in the university setting for developing the humanity of an individual.”

The Philosopher's Kings will be screened at about ten universities and special events throughout the country this year. According to Shen, the film will also be distributed on DVD and they are "in talks" to broadcast it on PBS.

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