PACIFIC PORTRAITS

The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University

VOLUME 1
Pacific Portraits: The People Behind the Scenes at Pacific University (Volume One)

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Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature [...] honey gatherers of the mind.
Friedrich Nietzsche

The “Bee Tree”, an iconic ivy-covered tree that stood on the Pacific University campus for many years, was already old and hollow when pioneer Tabitha Brown arrived in Oregon in 1846. Mrs. Brown started a home for orphans that would grow into Pacific University. According to the Forest Grove News-Times, the tree was “said to have housed a swarm of bees who furnished the little old lady with honey which she sold to buy provisions for her orphan children.”
“I love hanging out in bathrooms. I have the best conversations there.” The dark blue beanie sporting PARR Lumber on the front shields the “hair follicle-ly challenged” plumber that is Dave Cookman—Plumber Dave to the children at the Early Learning Center. In the boiler room of Scott Hall at Pacific University, Dave smiles and slaps the 1.5 million BTU boiler lovingly, like a heifer that’s been providing milk for years. Even after a half-century, its warmth is reliable to the building as well as the man hugging its 4’ diameter. Dave has served eight trips around the sun at Pacific University. He places a clean plunger on his head twice a year for the preschoolers at the ELC and he has evacuated at least a mammoth’s worth of hair from the various shower drains around campus. This unsung hero can get anywhere on campus and has taken a path down every which way to get there. As some of the teachers on campus have commented, Dave is the plumbing superhero.

But sometimes even superheroes can’t save the day when faced with unknown objects that are flushed by college students. “Guys, what did you flush down here?” Dave asked when the snake could not unclog a toilet that shouldn’t clog to begin with; a baseball could be flushed and it wouldn’t clog—Dave tested it himself. Eyes evaded, the college students could not gather up the courage to admit a washrag had made its new home in the plumbing. “That was one of the worst days. Water seeped down three floors from those flushes. If that didn’t cost six grand, I’d be surprised.” But this is part of having a hands-on job, and Dave is thankful daily.

Another common part of Dave’s job is removing masses of hair from shower drains. “Do you really want a photo of that?” a half-grin is pasted on Dave’s face as he poses for a photo with a clump of hair at the fingertips of his blue, 99% effective latex gloves. There’s more than just
hair that tangles under the drain plug of a college woman’s shower; gel, some mud from last night’s slip, conditioner that promised to eliminate tangles but remained burrowed in a lump of hair, and the many effects of moisture provided gobs of texture to the forgotten strands dangling from the grasp of Dave’s fingers. This is the most common task on his list of daily chores.

Small, socially acceptable wrinkles form at the corners of Dave’s eyes as his cheekbones rise and his mouth rests slightly agape. His body is hung back, filling the armchair, limbs spread to invite peace and patience to the interview. Fingers rise out of habit rather than conscious effort as the conversation shifts from us asking questions, to him answering; they tap the leather hard enough to make a noise, but with a gentle intention as to not disturb the air before he can speak. He likes to “face the day smiling,” regardless of what it brings. His eyes are just as oblivious as his lips to the looming silence of an empty office building; Dave is a man of stories.

One of those stories is that of his passion: drag racing. The exact moment the gas pedal falls will determine Dave’s success as a drag racer. Too early and he’s denied a winning slot at the finish. Too late and he might as well never start. Mastering this moment is one of
many steps for Dave to fly down the drag strip. Dave loves driving fast but likes staying safe while doing it; a fire suit covers his body and a parachute is attached to the center steer’s rear. He has wanted to drag race since he was a child and his racer neighbor was placed on top pedestal. He has wanted to drive a center-steer car since he was in the first grade.

Dave started working towards his passion by scavenging for the parts he needed to build his first car. Countless rods, sheets of metal, and hours are dedicated to the craftsmanship of each vehicle waiting patiently to bolt to the finish line. Knowing this, Dave leapt at the opportunity to build his from scratch. He works on it constantly when life provides him an opportunity to do so. It only takes the right tweak of the right part to get to that checkered flag faster. Dave strives to always make that tweak.

Those who are part of Dave’s life know the special place racing has in his heart. This year alone, Dave has only missed two races — one for his mother’s wedding and the other when his daughter was in the hospital. Six years ago when his dad died, Dave’s close friend Fred, a coworker, organized Facilities to buy him a new racing helmet in lieu of flowers. “That was one of the few times I’ve been speechless,” Dave tells us. “I still use the helmet today and will until it expires.”

The illusion of the stationary wheels when racing mimics the family that Dave finds at the track — ever-growing yet never changing. Along with his passion for racing, Dave is also an ordained Chaplain and officiates as such at the racetrack. He leads prayers before races and helps to facilitate after the unfortunate event of an accident. He supports the families and will even transport them to the hospital if necessary. Dave has even performed weddings for members of his racing family. “If I ever had to choose between racing and being a Chaplain, I would choose being a Chaplain,” if the future puts forth an ultimatum with Dave’s passions on either end, his heart will overpower his adrenaline rush. But there’s no law against Chaplains still attending drag races and praying with the racers, so Dave can continue leaning into a racer’s car, his hands folded in prayer, just before the car zips down the track at heart-stopping speeds and then get behind the wheel himself.