

Monday, October 2, 2006

Center of his existence

Maintenance director has a stadium named for him and 48 years' worth of unused vacation days.

By J. BRADY McCOLLOUGH
The Kansas City Star

Jim Hoelzel looks at his stadium, and he sees his life.

He sees 1965, his seventh year on the job. The stadium was built that year, and he got to cut the grass for the first time. He sees 1983. He replaced the creaking bleachers with the shiny gold ones that still remain. He sees last spring. It was track season again, which meant that he and his crew had to clean up a winter's worth of geese droppings.

It bothers Hoelzel that his stadium has become a bird sanctuary. As the director of maintenance for the Center School District, Hoelzel considers himself an expert problem solver. His best idea was installing a sounding device that imitated noises of a distressed bird. But even that didn't work.

"There's nothing you can do," Hoelzel says. "Geese are an endangered species."

Some would say the same about Hoelzel. Center athletic director Mark Jackson calls him a "dying breed." Hoelzel has worked at Center for almost 48 years. In that time, he's never taken a vacation. He works every weekend. Retirement age has passed, and at 68, Hoelzel isn't going anywhere. He still puts on his suspenders and work boots, wields the sledgehammer and climbs the 60-foot ladder to replace light bulbs at the stadium.

All those days spent in the Center football stadium, and Hoelzel never once thought about having his name put on it. That kind of thing was reserved for coaches and players, maybe an alum who went on to be something special.

But one night in 2003, it was Hoelzel's time. He was at a school-board meeting, working on some paperwork to pass the time. All of a sudden, someone started talking about naming the football stadium. The board had already decided. It would be called "Jim Hoelzel Stadium." The board asked Hoelzel to stand up. Hoelzel's family, led by his wife, walked out from the crowd. He'd been ambushed.

"He has high blood pressure anyway," recalls Katherine Hoelzel, his wife. "When they announced it, his face got so red -- the reddest I'd ever seen it."

They had to take Hoelzel into the hallway. He was hot. He needed some fresh air.

"Oh my God," Katherine thought, "I think we've killed him."

"It was really embarrassing for him. Because he's not used to things like that. He's always in the background."

Hoelzel, still in shock, got himself together and said a few words with his wife standing by his side. Then he left. He would never really bring it up again.

Jim Hoelzel clocked in on Nov. 8, 1958, a 20-year-old hired to make \$250 a month as a middle-school custodian. Wearing his khaki uniform, he scrubbed and waxed the floors of the cafeteria that day.

"Anything to make a dollar," Hoelzel says.

He had his whole life in front of him, but making that dollar was as far as Hoelzel could see. Jim grew up poor, helping his father's farming business after school and during the summers. He worked other jobs on the side.

After Hoelzel graduated, he went to work on the railroad for \$1 an hour. Only two years went by before he was offered more money to work for the Center School District, where Hoelzel had attended elementary, middle and high school.

Hoelzel and his first wife had a son and daughter by the time Hoelzel was 21. The kids grew up in the district with their father. Weekends were spent making the rounds.

"Growing up, our fun thing to do was check the buildings with my dad," says Brenda Allen, Jim's daughter. "It's so funny now. His workers get paid \$11 an hour to go around the building on their shift and check the windows and doors to make sure they're locked. Until we grew up, we didn't realize that was work. We thought that was fun.

"Other kids were off to Disneyland, and we were at the schools, sliding down the laundry chute."

In the nearly half-century since he returned to Center, Hoelzel has watched the district undergo constant change. New administrators. New buildings. New uniforms.

Hoelzel once cleaned a sewer line wearing a bowtie. The boss who came up with that bright idea? He's long gone, just like Hoelzel's first boss in the maintenance department. He retired many years ago at age 66. And don't bother inferring that Hoelzel should join him in the Winnebago. Through all the changes around him, Hoelzel has managed to remain the same.

The man still knows nothing else but work. He doesn't hunt, he doesn't fish, he doesn't watch TV, he doesn't travel.

"He doesn't have a hobby," Katherine Hoelzel says. "We have no idle time. He thinks if

you're not doing something, you're wasting time."

Hoelzel can count the times he's left the Kansas City area on his dirt-caked fingers. He's been on an airplane once, to Minneapolis on business, and he returned the same night. Katherine's kids have offered to take the couple to Hawaii, but Jim has no interest.

"If I was meant to fly," he often says, "I'd have been born with wings."

The district gave Jim Hoelzel his first week's vacation in the spring of '59. Hoelzel took it, but spent the week sodding the superintendent's yard.

He's taken nine sick days in 48 years. One time, he was working on the track at the middle school. It rained and rained that day. Jim had the flu so bad he couldn't stand up. Another time, he came down with something close to pneumonia. The district had to take his keys so that he wouldn't come to work. He missed two days that time. More recently, Jim had a ruptured appendix. He worked half a day, had surgery and missed six days.

In all, Jim estimates that he has racked up 464 unused sick days. That doesn't even count vacation time. Hoelzel is constantly badgering the district to pass some of his extra days off to his workers who need it. Jim, of course, does not need it.

"I'm on salary," Jim says, "so time doesn't mean anything."

Forty-two employees work for Jim as custodians or maintenance crew. Many of them are people who need a second chance. As Jim puts it, "We're hiring the unhirables."

Jim looks after his people. He and Katherine often lend hundreds of dollars at a time to employees who need it. Each time, they know it likely is not a loan. One man currently owes Jim \$3,200.

"He sees only the good in everybody," Katherine says.

There have been nights where Jim has bailed workers out of jail. Jim took a chance on Charlie Taylor, the head custodian of the high school, who had a previous parole violation. Nine years later, Charlie can proudly say that he hasn't taken a sick day in seven years. Taylor, like many Center employees, calls Hoelzel "Dad."

"They say if he ever retires, they're all walking," says Allen, who works part time for her dad. "They're only there because he's such a good boss."

Katherine Hoelzel believes helping people is Jim's calling. He just can't say no. That's why he is also the maintenance man for his church and just about anybody he's ever met. Jim's truck rumbling down the street is a sure sign that something is about to get done.

"He could have a full-time job just doing for people," his daughter says. "He can do so many things. He's a Good Samaritan."

Jim Hoelzel is on call 24 hours a day, and when he says that, he means it.

One time, in 1992, Jim and Katherine left for the Lake of the Ozarks for a night. Jim would take one of those vacation-day thingies. He returned the next day to a maintenance man's World War III.

The police had called because there had been a break-in at the school. A water main had broken. Jim couldn't believe it.

"It ain't worth going nowhere," Jim decided.

Who knows what would happen if Jim actually retired from Center? He doesn't plan on hanging around to find out.

"The day I die is the last day I'm going to work," Jim declares.

His daughter, Brenda, knows it's morbid to think about, but she has a theory on how Jim's going to go.

"He will die at one of those buildings," Brenda says, laughing.

She imagines something like this: She gets a call. Someone from the district. Your dad fell off the roof.

"He's been there all his life," Brenda says. "That's all he knows. I assume that's how he'll go."

And when that day comes, Jim's plot at Mount Moriah Cemetery will be ready.

"Already got the headstone set," Jim says, flashing an easy smile.

Hoelzel couldn't even procrastinate in his preparations for death. He figured it needed to be done, so why not now?

And that will always be Hoelzel's legacy, more than the name etched in big blue letters on the side of Jim Hoelzel Stadium.

People through the years will always wonder why Center named its stadium after a maintenance man. Even Hoelzel wonders. He still thinks it should have been his old shop teacher who announced the games for many years.

But the people, his friends and co-workers, decided otherwise. The stadium will forever be a monument to a man who couldn't stop working.

"When I interviewed here, I asked them, 'You named your stadium after a maintenance man?' " says Jackson, the school's athletic director. "To them it was like, 'Well yeah.' I really do think it's just out of respect for the man.

"He kind of did what Cal Ripken did in baseball. He just showed up and did his job."