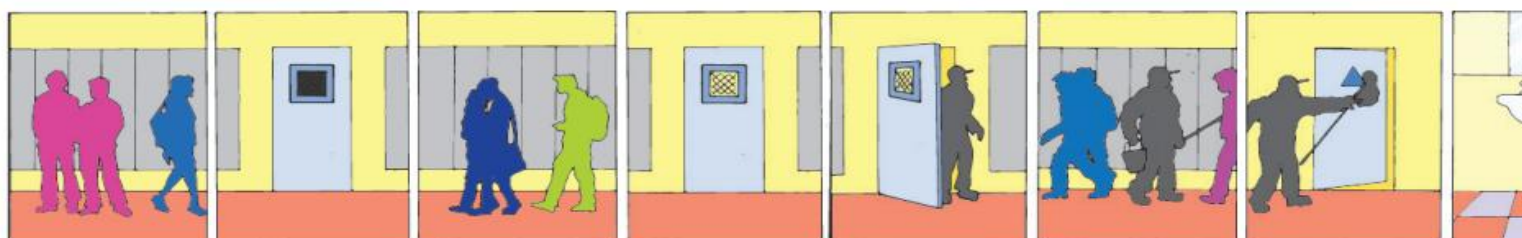


THE HIDDEN ROOTS OF REDWOOD: TIM MULLERY'S JOURNEY



Photo by Maxime Kawawa-Beaudan



BY MAXIME KAWAWA-BEAUDAN AND MICHAEL BENZ

Most days there was food in the fridge. Most nights of Tim Mullery's youth, when he returned from school, there was something on the dinner table. Some nights there was nothing, but that was life in Fairfield, a blue collar town marked by that red neon sign arching over Texas Street that had been hanging since 1925 and read "Fairfield, County Seat Solano County" a town of Clorox bleach factories and Budweiser breweries, three miles from the hulking gray C-17 Globemasters and C-5 Galaxies parked row on row on the tarmac at Travis Air Force Base. It was where Mullery's family called home.

Now, Mullery serves as Redwood's lead custodian, directing the team housed in room 160. At 34, he stands 6 feet 4 inches tall, an auburn beard stretching all along his jaw and cheeks. Everything from his teal uniform's shirt sleeves (rolled up to the elbows) to the beige chambray work boots he wears speak of long to-do lists. It takes a wide variety of skills and a vast breadth of practical knowledge to be lead custodian; Mullery is perpetually on call to replace ceiling tiles, inspect malfunctioning equipment and manage his team's operations. For the maintenance of Redwood's facilities, he's the first line of defense, and through it all, he's shaped by the teenager who grew up in a town whose largest employer was the military.

Mullery is a private man. He does his job quietly, in the background of a school of roaring halls and full classrooms and jostling crowds at the bases of stairways. Many members of his team, particularly those who work night shifts, share this trait of being, in his words, like a hermit crab, most comfortable in a shell. For Mullery, that characteristic traces its roots far back in his story.

"My life experience made me a quiet person," Mullery said. "I've been wronged by a lot of people, both of my fault and not of my fault. Even doing this interview is progress for me."

That introversion fits no job better than leading the custodial team; his work allows Mullery to stay largely behind the scenes while still doing good. But even as a teenager, attending a high school where bullying and teasing were far more common than at Redwood, he felt most comfortable in solitude. Fairfield High had some 3,000 students when Mullery attended, and an average class size was 45 kids. During his sophomore and senior years, he spent much of his time playing basketball (and

still practices twice a week). But when he was a sophomore his parents split up. He began to do the bare minimum to graduate and disconnected from his peers.

"Growing up I became kind of a loner. That's why I say I'd do high school over again if I could, because I'd just decided I didn't like people. I'd just go home and play video games and that was my life," Mullery said.

Disconnecting had its costs. By the time senior year came around, his grades had suffered. He faced a decision between playing basketball and graduating. In fact, he went into senior year with the credits of a sophomore.

At 17, it was his step father who pushed him to re-engage, to do chores around the house instead of gaming, to focus and fix the work ethics he'd developed over the years. He began to dedicate huge amounts of time to his studies.

"It was pretty much school from six in the morning till 10 in the evening," Mullery said.

In the end, his renewed concentration prevailed. He graduated three months early from high school while working a full time job at Target. However, he soon had another choice to make. Unlike Marin, Fairfield boasted few obvious opportunities after high school. While Mullery wasn't sure what he wanted to do as a career, he knew he wanted to do it far from Fairfield. If he got stuck there, he said, his life would never turn out the way he envisioned it. There were only two futures for kids in Fairfield: construction or jail.

At 22, he chose construction. He moved to Petaluma and started working for a company that he imagined would be his future, under a mentor who taught him to always pay attention to the details and seek perfection. At the same time, he met and began dating his future wife. But not long into his would-be construction career, the company he worked for closed. Mullery ended up working at

Old Town Glass in Novato for seven months, hoping all the while to join his good friend in starting his own glass company. Meanwhile, he took a position as a substitute custodian at Drake High School. Initially, he planned to work there only for six months. But his long-term plans had shifted, and he began to think about starting a family, and looking at the job's retirement and medical plans, he saw a future take shape.

"The best way I could phrase it is that at 24 years old I accidentally fell into a career," Mullery said.

After being hired at Redwood, he rose to a leadership position quickly, replacing the previous lead custodian five years earlier than he had anticipated, when his

predecessor became sick and retired.

While the promotion was cause for celebration, during that same year his daughter was born and he was in the process of losing his house; over the course of his 34 years, Mullery has lived in 22 houses.

Since the uncertainty of those initial years, Mullery has been a custodian in the district for a decade, learning most of his skills on the job and from observing maintenance personnel at work.

Of course, there's more to the title of lead custodian than hands-on work. As the team's leader, it's his responsibility to prioritize jobs, set up daily schedules, answer email requests, coordinate with the administration, put in work orders for aid from external companies, set up and clean up for events like rallies and even deliver mail around the school. Mullery is also the vice-president of the Tamalpais Union High School District's chapter of the California School Employees Association. In both of these pursuits, he has become a trusted voice and a capable leader, though when he was younger he never expected to be in such a position.

In this way, he represents an incredible success story. He spoke of friends in and out of jail and recovering from serious drug problems, but in his own life, Mullery has outpaced the obstacles of his initial circumstances and built a family as well as a career.

"When I got here I was a kid with a girlfriend," Mullery said. "Now I'm a man with a wife and a mortgage. I grew up at Redwood."

Today Mullery looks to the future, to the possibilities he sees in his children. He works to raise his two children correctly, to teach them proper values by being at their side.

"My parents weren't at much of my stuff. I want to be at those events. First day of kindergarten, first day of soccer practice, be at the games, give them every opportunity to succeed," Mullery said.

Reflecting on his own upbringing, he said, "Growing up was weird. As a kid I felt like I had it not so good, and looking back I realize I had it not so bad. I didn't have all the toys and gizmos but my dad worked non-stop and we usually had food to eat."

In his personal world, he works to open up to people around him. He strives to take down the barriers his own upbringing built, to move towards greater confidence

and sureness. He also plans to go back to school and study the subjects he loved in high school, like computer programming. He sees himself in some years taking an IT position in the district.

Most of all, he hopes to never stop having fun in his work.

"If I come in here and I'm not enjoying it, I won't be here. Life is hard. Work is just work. I get to come here and make a difference, and it's almost a break from reality. I get to just be productive and live," Mullery said.

Redwood holds a unique charm for Mullery. The ailments he saw in his high school days have become the strengths here. The students who would have been picked on in his high school are celebrated: the weird kids have become the cool kids. School spirit stands taller in the community here, especially at rallies.

"I really enjoy it. I may not come off that way but I love my job and everyone here," Mullery said. "I'll stand back at rallies and just watch and think to myself, even though I have to clean up afterwards, 'Wow, I get paid to do this?'"

However, Mullery sees the lack of hardship in Marin causing an unrealistic perception of the world in many students. Students often express a limited understanding of their good fortune and opportunities.

"Life doesn't always work like it does in this area," Mullery said. "Sometimes the appreciation is gone. You lose track of it when you break something and you're just given another."

What's more, students here rarely have to earn their possessions, which alters their view of how valuable things are.

"I can't compare [Marin] to where I grew up because it's different. People who don't work for things and just get them don't respect [the things] as much. But you can't blame a kid for where they happen to be born," Mullery said.

In the end, the place he was born is part of what shapes Mullery's own personality to this day. He demonstrates humility and gratitude, sometimes for the smallest luxuries he never had.

"There were times when I opened up my fridge and I was lucky if there was food, but there are times I open up the fridge now and I laugh because I'm lucky," Mullery said.

In his work and personal life, Mullery displays a consistent dedication to jobs well done, and in both the hurdles he has leapt and his daily endeavours, he exemplifies the best aspects of perseverance.

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Tim Mullery,
Head Custodian

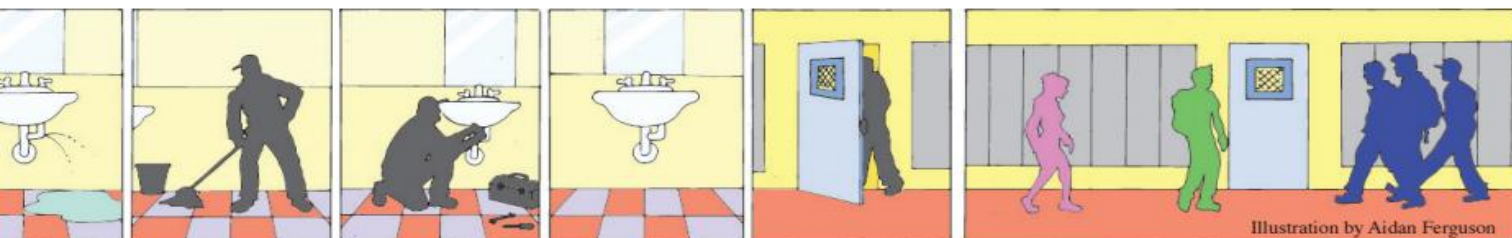


Illustration by Aidan Ferguson