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Onetime firefighter embraces chance to clean up

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By Bridget Murphy, The Florida Times-Union

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — He didn't have money for rubber gloves. But he couldn't afford to let a job go.

So into the toilet water went Ed Colleton's bare hands. To scour the bowl, his skin to its slimy slopes.

The Jacksonville man was tired, sore and broke. Wondering how he'd take care of his family. Thinking about how a man some might once have called a hero ended up stooped on his knees in the bathroom stall of some stranger.

"I was in there one night cleaning the toilet and I was crying," Colleton said recently, in a talk to others seeking second chances. "... But when I stepped back and my eyes cleared up, I said, 'That looks good. That's a good-looking bathroom. Let me do another one.' "

And he did, cleaning plenty of them for free to gain time and grade on the job. To pay for the supplies and equipment he needed to get his fledgling franchise going, Colleton worked without a payday for more than a year.

This was not the life a man who was a city firefighter for 16 years imagined for himself, or for the five family members he also had to move into public housing and feed with food stamps. They bathed with dollar bottles of dishwashing liquid. Their living room couches were a donation that came from an automotive garage.

Once Colleton was someone who had good health insurance coverage, who wouldn't have had to worry about his wife waiting two months to see a doctor even after a cervical cancer diagnosis. But that was before the mistake that in November 2004 left the veteran city official as just another inmate in a jail full of the accused. Extortion and official misconduct were the allegations. A month later, Colleton resigned from his job.

He was 38 years old and firefighting was all he'd ever known. He joined Jacksonville Fire and Rescue at 22, working at the vocation he'd decided on as a teenager when his father died in a fire. Authorities eventually dropped the charges. He'd cooperated with their investigation, and they decided he'd been a dupe for someone they wouldn't be able to convict.

But after Colleton's resignation, things would get even worse before they could start to get better.

Before he would find his salvation scrubbing away other people's messes. With everything Colleton cared about on the line, launching a janitor business became his own chance to clean up.

A year after he sat in one of their chairs, Colleton spoke to students at Operation New Hope on a morning in early January. The nonprofit has a program that helps people with criminal histories prepare for and find jobs, including those blending back into society after prison time.

Colleton got them laughing when he posed a hypothetical about his life. If three pit bulls were chasing his 6-year-old son and he had five minutes to turn in a work proposal, what would he do? Choose the work.

"I would look out the window and say 'Run, son, run! Because I can get insurance and get you fixed.'"

"You've got to run," Colleton told the class. "You've got to make it."

The former firefighter said that when he showed up at Operation New Hope, he was looking for a job after a towing business he started went under in the recession. He explained that because of background problems from arrests, he couldn't get a job.

He'd already paid \$2,500 to buy into a cleaning franchise that connected him with some janitorial work. But after paying for supplies, equipment, and training, no money was coming in even as Colleton was working whenever and wherever he could.

A chance at a janitor job at a local hospital didn't work out after a job interview.

"I called you in tears," he said, looking to his former case manager, who nodded from the audience.

But Colleton explained how he couldn't let himself fail. With his wife Aury's help, he applied for minority and other business certifications that might give him an edge in bidding for some public contracts. They spent hours wading through paperwork, filling out applications, culling through requests for bid proposals.

"And in that process there were setbacks," Colleton told the class. "I'd buy cleaning supplies instead of buying toys, instead of buying shoes for the kids. ... So they had to suffer, too. What was I willing to give up? Everything."

The risk paid off slowly. But finally, that first little \$60-a-week job came in. Then came another little job. Then another.

In December 2009, Colleton won a \$2,200 contract to cut the grass at one city building for a year. All he had to get it done was a three-wheeled lawn mower he borrowed from his mother. He mowed the lawn on Saturdays, when no one was around to see.

In September 2010, a contract came up to clean the carpets in all 21 of Jacksonville's public libraries. And a man without any employees, any carpet cleaning machines, any experience with a project of that size, knew he wanted that contract.

So Colleton made city officials an offer they couldn't refuse. He put in a proposal that was so low he ended up losing about \$6,000 in the end. But for 3 cents a square foot, the Edward Colleton Cleaning Service cleaned 695,000 square feet of carpet in two months' time.

And after that, he knew he could bid a job with confidence.

"Because that three-and-a-half cents of not being greedy got me in a place where I can walk up to any business and say 'I can do the job,' " says the now 45-year-old Colleton.

Even before the library contract, he'd won a job cleaning up a Florida State College at Jacksonville construction site a few months earlier. He'd worn a business suit to meet the project supervisor.

"When he showed up, I thought he was the boss and I thought someone else was going to do the work," said Fred Allmond of Choate Construction.

But Colleton pushed himself through the taxing labor, and labored over the finishing touches until the site glowed.

And when it did, he took pictures. Because to him, that clean space was a thing of beauty, a sign of job satisfaction he believed he'd left behind with his firefighting career.

"Cleaning is my way of protecting people now," Colleton says. "I get to save lives by making the environment people live in healthy."

Sometimes, that means more than someone might think.

On a recent Friday afternoon in January, Colleton headed to Stellar Group for a once-a-week cleaning job he'd landed a month earlier.

With a vacuum pack strapped to his back, he made a first attack on the dirt in the building's office area. He'd already finished cleaning two of the three bathrooms, reaching in bare-handed to swish disinfectant in the toilets.

"I don't waste energy on what could have been, what should have been," Colleton said. "... This is the way of the janitor. So I've thrown myself into it."

When he got to the industrial side of the plant, there was another bathroom they asked him to clean from now on. It was a ladies room that had been locked up and used for storage for years.

But five months ago, the business hired a lady welder who needed a locker room near her work area.

"This is supposed to be your new bathroom," Colleton told Katrina Montelongo, 27, when she wandered in to check out his work.

"Oh wow," she said of the improvement.

He promised it would get better. He would work at it week after week.


Colleton never told Montelongo he was the son of a widow who raised him while toiling as one of the city's first black female welders. But when he got on his knees to clean her toilet, there was joy in his heart.

An AP Member Exchange

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