

WCU Unsung Hero – Hank Countee



Hank Countee first came to our attention because of a Saturday afternoon last fall when he went well beyond the call of duty in his work as a WCU residence hall maintenance technician. When Countee learned that a parent at a South Campus soccer game had dropped her car keys

down a storm grate, he did what comes naturally – he rushed to help. Scrambling six feet down into a dank grate, then wading through water, leaves, twigs and other muck to fish out a set of keys is definitely *not* in a maintenance technician's job description. But Countee did just that, because, he says, "I am here to do whatever I can."

When you talk to Countee, it doesn't take long to realize that his formal job description is just the beginning. His mission, and the reason he comes to work at West Chester University, is to make the day brighter for as many people as possible. It's that simple, and it's that significant.

"I believe you reap what you sow," he says. "My faith inspires me to live the way I do. If I help someone, then maybe sometime, someone will help my wife or kids if they need help."

For many years, Countee was an operator in the University's boiler plant. He spent most of his career in plant operations, working at WCU, as well as Cheyney University and a small college in Virginia. When the University chose to transition to geothermal and high-efficiency natural gas and de-commission the boiler plant, Countee and other plant operators were given the opportunity to work in other roles at WCU.

Although he loved the technical aspect of the boiler plant, moving to a residence hall setting opened a whole new path for Countee. His duties in Schmidt and Killinger halls run the gamut from fixing jammed windows and clogged shower drains to figuring out why electrical outlets don't work and, once, putting back together a bed that collapsed. But, informally, Countee is a mentor and father figure to innumerable students. While he isn't involved in any organized diversity programming at WCU, Countee lives the University's values of equity and inclusion every day.

"We can count on Hank, he is here for the residents and the staff," says Alexis Washington, a graduate assistant in Killinger who is enrolled in the Higher Education Counseling/Student Affairs program. "Anyone you would ask would say the same thing."

"Hank always has the time to stop and talk to you about what's going on in your life," she adds. "He listens and you know he really cares."

Sometimes the conversations are about day-to-day stuff – whether a student studied enough for his calculus exam or how another one did at her gymnastics meet. But, other times, the conversations get deep.

“After the racial unrest in Ferguson, I had some students want to talk to me about what was going on,” recalls Countee. “I told them what it was like growing up in Virginia; I remember colored and white water fountains. I also encouraged them to dig into history and learn about the people who have paved the way. We need unity, not division, in the face of injustice.”

Countee is modest to a fault. It takes a lot of convincing to get him to talk about himself, and even then, he is quick to deflect the attention to others. “I owe a lot to my boss, George Showers, and the guys in dorm maintenance,” he says. “Without their help and support, I would not be the mechanic that I have learned to be. They are my family here at WCU.”

Just like the 692 students who live in Schmidt and Killinger are family. As he strides through Killinger one recent morning, calling out greetings to every student he sees, it’s clear that Countee believes in the inherent worth of each person. It’s a WCU core value, as well as a personal value for Countee. He’s one of many WCU employees who are working to create an environment in which every member of the campus community feels fully welcome. For some, it’s written into their job description. For others, like Hank Countee, it all comes down to making the day brighter for as many people as possible.