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Working in the Sewers Is a Dirty Job, but Someone's Got to Win

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Librado Romero/The New York Times

Sewage workers preparing for the rescue competition at the Jamaica wastewater treatment plant in Queens.

By ELLEN BARRY
Published: May 9, 2007

Correction Appended

A sewer is a slippery workplace. Water can move at the speed of oncoming traffic, even when it is not laden with tree branches, two-by-fours and the waste products known in the business as "turtles." A single footstep in the water can stir up enough gas to knock a man unconscious. And then there is the smell.

Enlarge This Image But yesterday the water was clear and sparkling as 18 sewage treatment workers engaged in their annual

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Librado Romero/The New York Times

Andrew Demicco, left, and Mel Newton, from the Tallman Island treatment plant in Queens, took part in the water analysis contest.

competition on a brilliant morning outside the Jamaica wastewater treatment plant in Queens. These were not simply sewage treatment workers, but an elite cadre of sewage treatment workers.

George Mossos, wearing a helmet emblazoned with a bald eagle, looked particularly happy. He grew up dreaming of being a firefighter, he said, but has no regrets that he ended up in a different line of work. "It's enough to serve the public," said Mr. Mossos, 30, though he added, "Firefighters, they get all the TV time."

The 20th annual Operator's Challenge — affectionately known as the Sludge Olympics — had an atmosphere somewhere between rodeo and spelling bee.

In one corner, the Jamaica Jesters sawed madly through a length of PVC pipe, trying to replace and seal a section of sewer without allowing too much water to escape. In another, the Bowery Bay Bowl Busters lowered themselves down a manhole to retrieve a dummy representing an unconscious co-worker, making sure they expelled dangerous gases from the space before descending.

Co-workers bellowed encouragement. Emily Lloyd, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, beamed.

"They're the people nobody sees," she said. "It's tough work. It's frequently unpleasant work. And they're terrific at it."

Joe Atkins, 55, who was on hand to judge the pipe event, said that his early days on the job had been the hard ones. He remembered coming home from work in the evenings, knocked out from inhaling methane, and falling fast asleep in his recliner. He can say now, 15 years later, that he was unprepared for the experience of dealing with raw sewage: condoms, tampons, rats, you name it. But those impressions faded after a few months.

"It's like listening to a train," he said. "You stop hearing it."

These days, Mr. Atkins is able to look at the work with a scholarly detachment. His nose is so finely tuned that he can tell from a highway when he's driving near a sewage plant. He spent six years at the Jamaica treatment plant, which is adjacent to Kennedy Airport and is distinguished by a steady stream of exotic waste.

"There's stuff coming into that sewer that even scientists haven't figured out," he said

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Everyone had a story.

Joe Fahey remembered looking down and realizing that the shapes sliding past him were eels.

Yogi Kemraj recalled a four-hour predawn battle with a tree branch jammed in a storm drain on 59th Street, as water barreled past him up to his neck.

Roger Alava grimaced, thinking of the time he had to rinse his mouth out with rubbing alcohol; like all the sewage workers, he has learned to hold his lips permanently pursed, but a tiny splash of sewage can still go astray.

It bothers Mr. Alava that the city's sewage treatment workers lack a municipal nickname, the way the police are New York's finest and the firefighters are New York's bravest. He likes to think of the sewage workers as New York's smartest; when a pipe is spewing sewage everywhere, or an unseen blockage creates mounting pressure, "basically, it's chaos organized," he said. "If something breaks, it's out of your control."

The Operator's Challenge highlights both the cerebral and muscular aspects of the job.

Upstairs in the laboratory competition, a panel of judges watched, making critical comments, as teams of workers measured the amount of oxygen in water samples, which indicates the presence of bacteria used to clean waste. Another test required the teams to perform exhaustive checks of a diesel-powered pump. (One team, which otherwise performed perfectly, was marked down for leaving a rag on top of the pump.)

The winners of the New York State challenge will progress to October's national competition in San Diego, a morale-boosting event founded in 1988 by the Water Environment Federation, which represents wastewater professionals. There they will face teams renowned for their exhaustive training and extraordinary speed. A team from Los Angeles, the Crushers, is said to travel on a tour bus emblazoned with its name.

John Neske, a judge and sewage worker, said he had been particularly impressed in the past to see the national teams compete to fix the broken sewer pipe.

"As the little bits of PVC came off the saw, they were smoking," Mr. Neske said. "It's unbelievable."

For most, though, yesterday's competition served mainly as a rare day of self-congratulation. Friends and family don't exactly clamor for daily news from wastewater treatment plants, and many workers, like Michael DeVita, carefully rid themselves of every trace of what they do during the day.

Mr. DeVita, 30, has a reputation for being a bit of a neat freak. His home is lined with pristine white carpeting, and he has always been particularly sensitive to smells. It is a testament to human flexibility that he has succeeded in wastewater treatment.

"I go down to the fish market," he said, "I can't handle it."

Correction: May 14, 2007

An article on Wednesday about the annual New York City sewage workers' competition misstated part of the name of an organization of wastewater professionals that founded a national competition, the Operations Challenge, to which New York State's winners will progress. It is the Water Environment Federation, not Foundation.

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