

Everyone's friend: School recycling collector 'a fixture of New Trier'



Jay Slotnick, of Northbrook, has collected recycling at New Trier High School since 1993.

Photos by Megan Bernard/22nd Century Media

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There's a smiling face roaming through the hallways at New Trier's Northfield campus, and even on your worst days, it's bound to cheer you up.

Enter Jay Slotnick.

The recycling collector has worked at the school for 25 years and has built a countless amount of lifelong friendships with administrators, teachers and custodial staff.

While collecting recycling, Slotnick, who has special needs, engages in playful banter — most likely about his favorite sports team, the Chicago Cubs — and is sure to share a quick story or ask how his friends' days are going.

But the charmer has quite a story of his own to share.

Before he began working for New Trier in 1993, Slotnick, a Northbrook resident, was “mainstream for drama” at Glenbrook South High School, his mother Valerie said.

“He attended GBS because of its outstanding special-needs program,” she added. “He really excelled there. He was the student of the week; it was the first time the school ever picked someone from special ed.”

Having “no reservations for getting up and entertaining people,” Valerie said, Slotnick participated in school plays, which lead him to the start of a possible modeling career post-graduation in 1992.

“We went to Shirley Hamilton and all these agencies, and they thought he was absolutely wonderful being special needs and handsome — what a combination,” she said.

“So we’d get calls from California saying, ‘Can you bring Jay to California tomorrow?’ Then we got another call for an American Airlines commercial in Florida.”

After several calls and possible job offers, Slotnick decided the modeling industry wasn’t for him. He didn’t want to be traveling and be away from home all the time.

Fortunately, another opportunity came when the Slotnicks’ phone rang once again. This time, it was a different caller: Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association.

NSSRA, a Northbrook organization that Slotnick was (and still is) heavily involved with, was based at New Trier’s Northfield Campus. At the time, the building was not used by the school; however, NSSRA staff knew of an open position at New Trier.

“They called me and said, ‘If Jay is interested, New Trier is looking for a person just like Jay to do recycling for the school,’” Valerie said.

Slotnick, who still remembers the exact interview day (Wednesday, Dec. 16, 1992), was hired on the spot and began the recycling position following winter break in 1993.

“Way back in the heyday,” Slotnick said, laughing.

Upon starting, Slotnick was able to choose the hours he worked. He decided every day, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Throughout the years, his schedule consolidated a bit with some budget cuts and Slotnick moved to the Northfield Campus in 2001, when District 203 reopened the campus.

During his shift, Slotnick pushes blue barrels donning seasonal logos of his favorite sports teams — the

Chicago Cubs, Blackhawks, Bulls and Northwestern Wildcats — while collecting recycling from each department.

“Everyone loves it,” Slotnick said of the logos on his barrels.

“Here comes the best-looking recycling man with two blue bins,” he added, laughing.

For administrators, like Director of Communications Niki Dizon, visiting with Slotnick makes their day “immediately a little bit better.”

“Jay is a fixture of New Trier. Everyone knows Jay; everyone loves Jay,” Dizon said. “We enjoy seeing him come with his big blue recycling barrels down the hall. We’ll have a little engagement about whatever sports teams are playing. Particularly if you’re not rooting for Jay’s teams, we’ll have some good-natured trash talk a little bit. It always ends up very friendly.”

“You just have to talk to Jay for a minute and you’ll start smiling,” added Lia Kass, New Trier’s communications specialist.

Slotnick’s workday positivity has gained him many additional New Trier friends along the way.

That was evident one year when Slotnick was playing Woody in Glenview Park District’s “Toy Story.”

“Unbeknownst to me,” Valerie said, “Jay had taken fliers [to New Trier] and when we came to his play that night, one of the ladies from NSSRA said, ‘Do you know there is a huge group of people coming from New Trier?’ I said, ‘What?’ There were 25 or 30 people that showed up to see his play.”

New Trier is “a real family for him,” Valerie added.

“He thoroughly enjoys it,” she said. “No matter where ever we go — we could be at the airport, walking downtown Chicago, in the theater — there’s always a ‘Hi, Jay.’”

Slotnick has also received support at several other activities, like when he won back-to-back gold medals in 2012 and 2013 at the regional Special Olympics swimming meet. At state, he’s earned two silver medals and a bronze in swimming, as well.

Additionally, Slotnick has won a gold medal in Special Olympics bowling and continues to act in area theater programs.

The multi-talented recycling collector shamelessly plugged his next Brightstar Theatre show, “Johnny B. Goode,” in the spring, hoping his New Trier friends will make it out once again as he plays the lead role.

“New Trier is like a huge family to me,” Slotnick said, “and I love my family so bad.”