



In this sort of in-between time of the year, it is also meant to be absolutely precious days when teachers and aides and school administrators and bus drivers and other staff get a break from the chaos of attempting to shape children's lives for the better. However, someone must still ensure that the building is taken care of, and to make undoubtedly certain that everything is ready to go back to full-scale operation of managing that chaos come next week. That often thankless, but most pivotal responsibility, falls on the usually taken-for-granted custodians. And on this day as we not

only look towards a new year of whatever possibilities ensue, this also invites us to take time to give thanks for the past year's stories that have shaped the world for the better, including the accounts that are not as well known by most of humanity. So, I want to share with you such a moving tale from a school located about an hour's drive south of Baltimore, Maryland.

Back in 1973, a man named Louis Watkins started working at Lothian Elementary School, in a position that might be taken for granted by most others in the education enterprise, not to mention he had a different skin color than the rest of the staff, which might have led to a few more instances of being looked down upon, to say the least. Nevertheless, Mr. Watkins, as he was more known by the students, started putting his heart and soul into taking care of the classrooms and cafeterias and hallways and bathrooms and every nook and cranny imaginable, because that's just the way he was wired. And although his physical stature might have been rather imposing to the younger children, and even some of the big-kid adults, towering over most who walked into the building, instead, he was considered a most "gentle giant." In the lunchroom, he would help countless students open those stubbornly sealed pudding cups, and when a boy accidentally dropped his glasses into the trash, Mr. Watkins just immediately went in and pulled them out before the nearby father had a chance to do so, all the while the boy was thoroughly embarrassed. In the adjacent gym, he would shoot hoops with the students to help them feel a sense of friendship, as if even a giant could care for the comparatively smallest of life.

Just over a month ago, Mr. Watkins was asked to walk into the gym, probably assuming there would be some children who wanted to play basketball with him. Instead, the entire student body and teachers and staff filled the bleachers and the floor, as they held signs extending appreciation for him. They chanted Mr. Watkins over and over, as they did their best to commemorate his 51 years of taking care of the building that became a second home to many. Fifty-one years of putting his heart and soul into classrooms and hallways and cafeterias and bathrooms and every nook and cranny of a massive place, so that the rest can focus on shaping not just the future but the present lives of young people for the better. And as Mr. Watkins, who did his best to avoid the spotlight for over five decades, was attempting to wipe the tears coming down from his eyes, the news was shared that the faculty and staff voted unanimously to rename the cafeteria Watkins Café and the gym Watkins Court, both places for which countless students could remember the giant unleashing an even more spectacular force of love and compassion and basic human respect. Thankfully, many of Mr. Watkins' family were able to attend as well, including his son, who thanked his father for showing him the value of dedication to the work for others, to the point that for his son, he believed his father "was the next best thing to God for him."

Yes, this is the rather interesting in between-time, not just for some to get a break from whatever chaos on the work-front, but also looking back on the past 12 months, and maybe even the totality of life long before that, while also knowing that a new year is coming. So, it is only appropriate that we hear this reading from Ecclesiastes: that there are most certainly times for such wonderings about this journey. But hopefully in the looking back, we also give thanks for the stories that are still somehow,

someway still emerging to give us just enough hope to believe that there is indeed good in this world. To make us believe that this God of the ultimate goodness continues at work on this earth that the Divine still so loves. And that just as the most transcendent hope came to life in a most overlooked part of Bethlehem long ago, through an often looked-down upon teenage girl, such awe-inspiring beauty is still wondrously appearing in the overlooked places, in the often looked-down upon children of God of all ages.

Now, for Mr. Watkins, 2025 will be just another year of giving all he has into taking care not just of buildings, but of people, too. This year will be just another collection of 365 days for him to bring God's most awe-inspiring love to life. And it will also be yet another rendition of countless moments' when God will insist on ensuring everyone knows that nothing will happen in this life to separate anyone from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord. For everything, there is a time for every matter under heaven, but in every time, there will be the death-defying and life-giving presence of God who thoroughly adores the often-overlooked Mr. Watkins' of the world, not to mention the children who walk into his school, and all of you, no matter what 2025 brings and well beyond that into all eternity. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

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