



# Sunday Standard-Times

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## Pride in a job well done



On any given day you'll likely find John B. DeValles Elementary School custodian Susana Martins keeping the floors of the school spotless. The yellow 'wet floor' caution signs dot the main hallway of the school. Above her head hang lights she placed to liven up the feel of the school. [PETER PEREIRA PHOTOS/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG]

Susana Martins' office in the century-old John B. DeValles Elementary School is a microcosm of her approach to her job as senior custodian there.

The back wall is covered with shelves lined with cleaning supplies. There's a desk with a Patriots banner hanging above it. A bowl in the middle of the desk has bananas and tangerines. There's a coffee maker and a fish tank.

On the cork board, there are photos of friends and loved ones. And in this place of pride, among those photos, there's a laminated clipping: A New

Bedford Public Schools employee spotlight featuring Martins standing next to a decorated Christmas tree.

This room wasn't always happy place. "It used to be a dump inside this room," Martins said.

But Martins, "Miss Sue" to the students, transformed it.

That sense of pride in her job has the old school shining brightly and Martins, the only woman in the district's maintenance staff, dubbed the "mom of the school" by Principal Darcie Aungst.

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John B. DeValles Elementary School custodian Susana Martins gives third grader Alzira Bela Esteves a hand with her books as she tries to get the notebook she needs for class.

*"I love it, to be honest with you. I take pride in what I do."* — Susana Martins





John B. DeValles Elementary School custodian Susana Martins holds the front door as Suzanna Arruda fixes the lock before students arrive. [PETER PEREIRA PHOTOS/ THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG]



Susana Martins cleans up some spilled cereal milk on the floor of a classroom. In the morning, students can have breakfast in class, and often Martins is called in to keep things spotless.



Susana Martins uses a special machine to suck up the water around a faulty boiler on the bottom level of the school.

# ‘I choose to go beyond’

Miss Sue’s dedication inspiring to DeValles Elementary family



First grader Azouraa Williams, 6, is eager to show custodian Susana Martins that her tooth fell out overnight and she was visited by the tooth fairy. In the background, the lights that she hung to liven things up have become a permanent fixture on the main level of the school, with plans to install some on the top level already in the works.



A student gives Susana Martins a high-five, after successfully throwing his breakfast milk carton in the garbage after having breakfast in class.



Susana Martins brings a set of chairs for a classroom that a teacher is putting together. The school has three levels of occupied space, and with no elevator, Martins had to make three trips to bring the necessary chairs to the classroom.

By Aimee Chiavaroli  
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NEW BEDFORD  
As she walked into John B. DeValles Elementary School, a young girl with pink rimmed glasses said, “Sue!” and gave the senior custodian a hug.  
Susana Martins, 54, is somewhat of a celebrity at DeValles Elementary. Walking down her shining hallway floors, students call her “Sue” or “Miss Sue,” and they greet her with a hug or high five.  
Martins tends to those hallways, lit with strings of Christmas lights that are all connected to a single plug and a pristine fish tank that students are mesmerized by. A couple sections of the wall on the bottom floor near where student bathrooms are located, are painted in the colors of a rainbow. Those are a few examples of ways that Martins has beautified the circa 1911 building.  
At the school one morning in September, staff could hardly contain their appreciation for Martins, noting the school is spotless and sparkles and that she’s the best in the district.  
And her work is not lost on Principal Darcie Aungst, who heads two of the oldest schools in the city, DeValles and James B. Congdon Elementary.  
“She’s like the mom of the school,” Aungst said.  
Martins makes the children and staff feel pride in the “antique” school.  
“The way she cleans and polishes, you breathe easier, you feel better coming into the building,” Aungst said.  
Martins, who’s been at the school for about two years after

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# MARTINS

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being a custodian at the Alfred J. Gomes Elementary and then Congdon, doesn't brag, but she admits that she works hard and goes above and beyond. She said that's who she is.

Martins, who now lives in Fairhaven, came to the United States in 1982 from the Terceira Island in Portugal when she was 16 years old. Instead of going to school in the U.S., she worked.

When she was 18, she worked at a now-shuttered electronics company in New Bedford on Cove Street. Then she worked at a curtain factory where she met her wife of five years, Sue Arruda, the only woman in maintenance within the school department, Martins said.

She was also a personal care assistant and did some house-keeping. A neighbor persuaded her to apply for a custodial position with the schools.

While at DeValles, a custodian position opened at Sea Lab. Martins could've left DeValles for a newer, all-one-floor school with air conditioning, but she didn't.

"I love it, to be honest with you," Martins said. "I take pride in what I do."

DeValles is an old building, she noted, but with some love and care, it can be more than that.

Martins starts at 6:30 a.m. when she cleans classrooms before teachers arrive. In the hallway, she sets out trash barrels beside buckets for liquids which have a strainer on



**Susana Martins offers to help students bring carts containing breakfast for their classmates up the stairs from the bottom level of the school where the cafeteria is. Students eat breakfast inside their classroom, so every morning a group of students from each classroom will go downstairs to pick up carts with the breakfast items and deliver them to the classrooms.** [PETER PEREIRA/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG]

topso kids can dump their leftovers from breakfast. Then she cleans it up like it was never there. She carries the bags of trash downstairs to the lower level to then take outside. The school doesn't have an elevator.

"Every day you get a surprise, no matter what," Martins said, which sometimes means vomit, milk spills or a clogged toilet.

She began to decorate the rainbow-colored walls with dragons, the school's mascot. She advocated for the cafeteria to get stainless steel tables to replace the wood tables that staff prepped food on, and has cut the school's grass with a push lawn mower.

Over the summer, the cafeteria was power washed, floors were waxed and the school was cleaned from top to bottom — literally — from light fixtures, walls, doors to the floor.

But Martins doesn't work

alone all day. She's trained 23-year-old Shaystin Rogers, who went to DeValles as a kid.

Rogers, known as "Mr. Shay" to students, said working with Martins is awesome and has been that way since the start.

"We have a blast, we joke and we have fun... we make the best of it," he said.

Although Martins is technically in a senior position, she's made it known that she's not the boss of Rogers, but they

work together. He has a similar work ethic and doesn't like to sit still.

When Rogers, a graphic design student at Bristol Community College, was asked to paint the front doors of the school, he delivered, insisting he do it on his own time. The result was the Earth with the words "welcome" and "bienvenido."

Christine Gomez, coordinator of the DeValles Parent Teacher Organization, who's been involved with the school for 10 years and currently has a second grade daughter there, said the school is at its finest thanks to Martins.

"You can tell... she has a love for what she does, and you can smell it and you can see it," Gomez said.

Across from the rainbow-painted walls is Martins' office, which she shares with Rogers. The back wall has shelves stocked with cleaning supplies, but Martins has made it feel like home.

"It used to be a dump inside this room," Martins said. But not anymore, since she turned it into an office.

Above her desk is a banner and framed photo in support of the New England Patriots. A bowl on a table in the middle of the room has bananas and tangerines. There's a coffee maker and a fish tank.

Pinned to her cork board is a laminated New Bedford Public Schools employee spotlight

which includes a picture of Martins standing next to a decorated Christmas tree; it stands among photos of loved ones.

When Martins talked about her work, she said she's not trying to put down other custodians.

"This is me," Martins said. "I choose to do what I do and I choose to go beyond."

Follow Aimee Chiavaroli on Twitter @AimeeC\_SCT