



Photographs by Astrid Fiecken/The Washington Times

Curtis Carmichael, above, has the dirty but necessary job of cleaning out portable toilets for Don's Johns Inc. He used a vacuum hose, below, to empty the toilet's contents, always being careful to get out of the way of splatter.

A job well done

Don's Johns driver of the year — for taking care of business

By William Glanz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Don't tell Curtis Carmichael about dirty work.

When nature calls, he answers.

Mr. Carmichael pulls his truck up to a construction site in Alexandria, hops out and walks toward three portable toilets sitting next to a pile of rebar.

It's time to give the johns their weekly cleaning, and Mr. Carmichael, who has worked at Don's Johns Inc. the past two years, will remove what plenty of others have left behind.

"After I started this job I thought 'what did I get myself into?'" he says.

What he's gotten into is plain to see. And smell. A wall of stink slams him in the face when he pulls open the plastic door to begin the dirtiest of deeds.

Mr. Carmichael swears it isn't that bad, but he's willing to consider an opposite view that perhaps he's become accustomed to having his sense of smell pulverized Monday through Friday. And during summer, he concedes, heat can bake the contents of a john and test even the hardiest of Don's Johns 15 drivers.

He begins his day as early as 5 a.m.



ON THE JOB

fiberglass thrones.

Mr. Carmichael, 45, starts early so he can finish early and tend to his hobby. He owns two drag cars and races in the region on one-eighth and one-quarter mile tracks, reaching

to make his rounds, and he may make as many as 70 stops in a day throughout Virginia, depending on his route, to empty and clean the

speeds up to 146 miles per hour.

He works quickly, too. Cleaning a single toilet can take as little as four minutes.

Or there may be unexpected hurdles. He found a dead squirrel in a toilet once. Sometimes the johns are simply missing, pinched by vandals with a curious, perhaps clinical, sense of humor. "The whole thing," he says. "Now what are you going to do with that?"

Some johns end up on their side, see JOB, page C13

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lying down like victims.

"Kids like to tip them over," he says.

It doesn't make sense, but it does make a big mess.

Don and Thelma Rainwater started the business in 1964. They began with 14 portable, wooden toilets. Now they have an estimated 5,000.

Thelma bought out Don when they separated, and she is the company's president. Her granddaughter, Kristie Harrell, is in charge of day-to-day operations.

A monthly rental in Virginia, with a cleaning once a week, costs \$95. It's \$105 in the District, and the family-owned company, based in Chantilly, doesn't

do business in Maryland.*

Most of Mr. Carmichael's stops on Wednesday were at residential construction sites, where contractors rent a single john. When Mr. Carmichael, the company's driver of the year in 2005 for his performance, pulls up to a home in Old Town, he grabs his rubber gloves before shooting out the door. The gloves go nearly to his elbow and are the first line of defense.

"I always have an extra pair with me," he says.

He takes a quick look at the toilet then returns to the truck to grab his vacuum. The vacuum hose has a three-foot long metal piece attached to the end. The metal end of the vacuum hose ensures Mr. Carmichael can empty the rank contents of the toilet bowl without getting too close.

The powerful vacuum sucks up the contents of each toilet and deposits them into a 1,000-gallon container on the back of Mr. Carmichael's truck. Drivers empty containers at waste treatment facilities at the end of each day.

Vacuuming the toilet bowls is perhaps the trickiest part of the job and Mr. Carmichael is adamant: You've got to have an exit strategy to avoid getting splattered. Splatter ranks among the most disgusting hazards of a job full of disgusting hazards, and it's happened to him.

"If it happens once, you'll know what to do next time," he says.

Mr. Carmichael keeps one foot outside the john, propping the door open with his leg so he can get out quickly if the need arises.

Removing the contents of a

toilet bowl — five gallons of water, plus deposits — takes just moments.

No splatter this time, and it's all downhill from here.

Then he cleans the toilet, seat and walls and puts five gallons of clean water back into the bowl. He only has to clean around the top of the bowl with his brush.

If there's a line in the sand, this is it.

"We don't have to go all the way down. Just clean the perimeter at the top. I think I'd have to switch jobs if I had to clean all the way down," he says.

In reality Mr. Carmichael has few complaints about his job.

"I'm doing something that someone else doesn't want to do," he says. "But I'm doing something that needs to be done."

Even if he is pooped at the end of the day.

* At the time this article was published. Since then, Don's Johns has expanded our service routes to cover the entire metropolitan region, up to and including Baltimore, MD.