

DAY ON THE JOB

# PWE mechanic doesn't water down duties



Andrew Guy Jr.

You drive home from work, speeding past the murky water in bayous and streams. At home, you turn on the kitchen faucet to boil water for dinner or jump into a hot shower or bath to relax.

What no one does is connect the dots. The murky mud you've passed becomes the clean water H<sub>2</sub>O you used. Procuring, cleaning and filtering the city's drinking water are complex undertakings.

And employees like Billy McCallister make it possible.

“This plant runs 24 hours,” McCallister, Public Works and Engineering mechanic, said recently. “It never shuts down. Ever!”

Not even during Hurricane Ike, Tropical Storm Allison or the random torrential rain and other extreme weather for which Houston is known.

## Water World

Houston gets most of its drinking water from Lake Livingston, Lake Conroe and Lake Houston. Bayous and streams feed those lakes. The city’s drinking water ecosystem produces and distributes 146 billions of gallons of water yearly, according to PWE.

The procuring and distribution of water is through an elaborate 7,000-mile pipeline that lies beneath the Houston area.

## Keep it moving

McCallister, who is classified as a tier one city employee, works at the Southeast Water Purification Plant. As a mechanic, he ensures that the metaphorical water train keeps moving. As a tier one employee, his job is essential, and he is required to report to work during emergencies.

McCallister has been with the city of Houston nearly two years. He is also a licensed contractor, an auto mechanic and a plumber.

“I’m fortunate in that I have a lot of trades,” McCallister said. “I can do plumbing. I can do carpentry. I can fix cars if I have to.”

The purification plant at 3106 Genoa-Red Bluff Road houses dozens of buildings and is surrounded by wire fencing.

## Keeping machines in shape

He loves the variety of his job, McCallister said. Most days are spent running around fixing any issues that come up.

A lot of time is spent on preventive maintenance: inspecting equipment, making necessary repairs, and eyeballing operations, he said.

On a recent day, McCallister inspected the telescopic valves that inspect treated water for any remaining sediment. Technicians in the high-tech control room several hundred feet away operate the valves.

“I’m just going to grease these up a bit,” McCallister said. He begins going down the long line of valves, inspecting their arms and greasing joints and bolts.

Nearly every machine, part, nut and bolt involving the mechanics of the plant has a corresponding number used to track maintenance.

“So, I just inspected that bolt,” McCallister said, after checking the hinges on a valve. “That bolt has its own number in the computer system. We have to make sure that that is documented.”

At the end of the day, he will file a detailed report on each task he has completed.

## Duty calls

He often gets called in the middle of the night, McCallister said. Recently he was awakened at 1 a.m., when the overnight staff couldn't get one of the backup pumps to work properly.

"I sometimes spend more time with these guys than my wife," he joked. But she understands.

McCallister credits his strong work ethic to his upbringing.

"All my life my dad showed me how to fix things," McCallister said. "He was a smart guy, and I'm glad I paid attention. But it's not like I'm a master of anything. If you have an attitude that you know everything, and you're not going to listen to people, that's not going to get you anywhere. I have things that I know, and that I'm good at, but, I've learned a lot from other people, and I always listen to other people."