

15 MINUTES

One man's trash

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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Buford Dilbeck steered his garbage truck and its one ton mechanical arm - made for nabbing the bin stuffed with your trash - and tossed the contents in the back.

He drove towards Heritage Palms Country Club in Fort Myers last Tuesday, where his route began.

It's been his full-time job since 1991, and in those 17 years he's covered every garbage route in town; his favorite being a scenic stretch of McGregor Boulevard, where lies the waste of the well-off and powerful. He has collected the trash of mayors, millionaires and probably yours too, at one time or another.

"(Heritage Palms) is a gated community," Dilbeck said, turning the heat on in the truck. It was still cold, starry and dark. "Pretty upscale."

Each time Dilbeck used his joystick, causing the mechanical arm to perform its repetitive task, there was a vrooming sound and then the truck jiggled as the trash was compacted.

"The average route has, I'd say, a minimum of 1,100 to 1,200 cans."

But Dilbeck doesn't keep count. He just peeled off his jacket as the morning backdrop turned purple, then dusty-orange over Heritage Palms' golf course, and went from one driveway to the next. The day's first jogger appeared at the end of the street as if cued by the sunrise, a black silhouette moving rhythmically against the sky. Dilbeck sometimes listens to sports radio in the

truck, smokes an occasional Salem and eats lunch on the go.

"I'll hit this green button and see that?" Dilbeck asked, looking through the back window. "That's my packer moving."

He does this start-stop-vroom/jiggle continuously until about 3 p.m.

"You feel it at the end of the day," he said. "Basically what I am is a truck driver."

Dilbeck grew up in South Philadelphia (the fourth-born child in a family of four girls and four boys). He worked for UPS, Frito-Lay, Wonder Bread and other big wholesalers out of his hometown, which had him driving all over Pennsylvania. But that was all after he graduated high school at 16, joined the Army at 17 and went to Vietnam.

Dilbeck left by train, bound for South Carolina. He trained in California and finally Fort Riley, Kan. before being shipped by boat into the Mekong Delta south of Saigon, where he operated an M60 machine gun, all before his 21st birthday.

"I was lucky to come back in one piece," Dilbeck said.

When he got back, Dilbeck spent three years in college on the GI bill and trained as a paralegal, thinking of someday being an attorney. But he started a family in the 1970s, and went to work full time as a truck driver.

"Once you make your decision, that's usually the way it goes - at least that's the way it is with me," he said. "Groceries, gas money, rent and a family - that'll change your life in a heartbeat. I don't have too many regrets, though. It's been a good ride so far."

Dilbeck was driving for a Philadelphia deli in 1991. It was hard times and the owners had to lay off Dilbeck rather than their neph-

ew. So he moved to Fort Myers that spring, where his sister-in-law lived. When he got to town, Dilbeck said he "pounded the bricks," getting work where he could, at the Salvation Army and at day labor jobs. He ultimately decided to work for Fort Myers' Solid Waste Division, rather than working for Budweiser, he said because the benefits were better.

Then he started at \$6.35 per hour, and moonlighted; with two children he was eligible for food stamps. His wife, Barbara, worked as an operating room technician for 10 years at Lee Memorial Health System.

His youngest son Clay - an EMT who plans to be a firefighter - lives in north Cape Coral near Dilbeck. His oldest, Edward, moved back to Pennsylvania and is a plumber.

"That's where his heart was," Dilbeck said. "That's why he went back."

Dilbeck's heart, rather, is still firmly planted in his own chest. Or maybe in his intriguing name: "Buford Dilbeck."

Buford is an old Southern name, he said; an unusual name inherited from his grandfather, who had moved from Knoxville, Tenn. to Philadelphia to be a baker. It was a name which assured his position as a fighter in grade school and high school. Even girls



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Buford Dilbeck in his garbage truck.

made fun of it.

"But you can't fight girls," Dilbeck said, smiling. "Just maybe pull their pigtails."

And Dilbeck means, in German, "sour brook."

"If you knew my father, you'd know why," he said.

Inside a gated section of Heritage Palms where the houses had doubled in size - a gated community within a gated community - a boy stood with his father in the garage; they both stood and watched Dilbeck pick up the green bin. He tooted his horn at them and they waved; he drove a few feet to the next driveway; vroom/jiggle.

"The older kid's don't like it, because it smells, especially in the summer time," he said. "But the little kids really get a joy out of it." ■

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