

## **Meet the Garbage Guy:**

### **An Article from the Northeast newspaper about our very own Gregg Hickey!**

“Don’t thank me, thank the U.S.Navy.”

Gregg Hickey swears he’s said just that a hundred times to folks who stop to thank him while he walks his usual routes. You can often seem patrolling Johnson Street or Stinson Boulevard, trash bag in hand, collecting the flotsam and jetsam that accumulates on the busy roads.

Hickey has been collecting trash up and down the streets of Northeast for years. He remembers making the conscious decision back in 2001, shortly after that attack on the World Trade Center on September 11. He and his wife had both been walking to and from work for several years, and he wanted to do something to help the neighborhood with the time it took.

“There’s no point in taking the time to do the exercise if you’re not going to do anything with it,” he said. Hickey said that his time in the Navy was largely what inspired his resolution to keep his route to work clean. He enlisted as a corpsman straight out of college, as his father did before him. The year was 1968. No one in their right mind wanted to be sent overseas into Vietnam (he remembered with a bit of hyperbole that the recruiter locked the door behind him before he could change his mind), but because of his education (he has a doctorate in anatomy), he ended up being stationed at a research base in North Carolina, and was later relocated to a naval hospital in Taipei.

The Navy taught Hickey the value the environment, to keep himself organized, and to keep his living space clean. Of all the U.S. military departments, he explained, the Navy is the most concerned about environmental conservation and pollution cleanup. Even during his enlistment it was understood that pollution posed an existential threat, and it can be combated by adjusting daily habits. When he came home, he looked for simple ways he could apply his values to civilian life.

“Broken windows in garages invite more broken windows. I believe that, when that’s the case, it shows that people simply don’t care that there’s a broken window...that they’re not invested in the area.” He explained. The same principle applies to litter, which is most conspicuous by its absence. You notice when a

neighborhood is clean, and Hickey believes that greatly impacts people's attitude about their homes. "I do it to maintain (people's) property values."

When Hickey came home from the Navy, he got a job working for R & D Systems, a biological research company based in Minneapolis. There, he put his doctorate in anatomy to use. "What exactly did I do? That's the kind of question people would have asked me there, tongue in cheek. I liked to think of myself being an internal consultant. I tried to help people solve problems," he explained.

Every day, on the way out the door, Hickey grabbed a garbage bag. His route to work took him up Stinson Boulevard, and since he was heading that way, he figured he might as well grab a discarded bottle or two. By the time he arrived at work, the bag was usually full and ready for the dumpster out back. The weather didn't matter. He became quite an expert at walking backwards against the wind during the winter months, as trash tends to accumulate more when there's snow on the ground, as it gets buried and pushed around by plows. The median on Stinson gets riddled with bottle-garbage snowdrifts unless someone gets rid of the garbage quickly.

"People tend to throw out garbage when they think it can't be found," he said. Hickey retired in 2016, but he still walks his route on Stinson every weekday, and on weekends he patrols Johnson Street. He isn't so keen on trudging through the snow during the winter anymore, as he winters in Las Vegas, but he is no less about cleaning the streets there.

"My trip was unique in this regard," said Hickey. "I'd ask people who came up to me to thank me for my efforts or noted that I've been doing it for years, and I said 'Did you ever see anything unusual about what I was doing?' And they would pause and say 'not really, give me a hint' And I'd say 'how was I dressed?' I was always in a shirt and tie. I never wore a suit, but I always went to work in a shirt and tie... Even middle-level management can actually, with their shirt and tie, go out and pick up garbage.