

TO: File Susan D'Alessandro, Plant Manager District  
FROM: Hugh F. Bovich Jr., Borough Plant Manager  
SUBJECT: Brooklyn/ Staten  
DATE: Threatening M  
September



Hugh Bovich, the 300-pound custodial borough manager who did in whistleblower Susan D'Alessandro (right), turns shy two weeks ago outside a hearing on D'Alessandro's gender-discrimination suit.

**Bias Is Found In the Hiring Of Custodians**  
**U.S. Threatens to Sue City and School Board**  
By ALISON MITCHELL  
The Justice Department has found New York City and the city's Board of Education discriminated against members of minority groups in recruiting and promoting the custodians who maintain the city's schools.  
In letters sent to city officials and a lawyer for the custodians' union, Deval L. Patrick, Assistant Attorney General in the Civil Rights Division, said the board and the city should reach an out-of-court agreement to end the discrimination or face a lawsuit.  
The Justice Department

**Giuliani Presses Bid to Privatize Custodial Work in Some Schools**  
By ALISON MITCHELL  
The Giuliani administration set the stage yesterday for a showdown with the school custodians' union over contracting out some or all of its work to private cleaning companies.  
Randy L. Levine, the city's Labor Commissioner, said in an interview that he would seek a new contract with the union that would allow the city to use private contractors.  
The bid to privatize school custodians came as part of a larger struggle at City Hall over the oft-stated intentions of Mr. Giuliani, the first Republican Mayor in a generation, to put city workers into competition with private contractors to spur efficiency, cut costs and reduce the size of the city workforce.

# Swept

**S**USAN D'ALESSANDRO BANGED on the door.

No one answered, so she banged again—*harder*—and scanned the hallway of Grover Cleveland High School in Ridgewood, Queens. Three thousand students come here every day. D'Alessandro thought, but the place looks like an abandoned factory: trashed stairwells, the linoleum floor layered with dust and larded with chewing gum. Broken lights, plugged toilets, dead radiators. Water fountains that haven't given up a drink in years. A swimming pool that's been drained and locked away.

D'Alessandro thought she was supposed to do something about all of this. It was February 1989, and she had just become the Board of Education's first female "plant manager"—a district supervisor in charge of 30 school custodians. She was new to the job, so there was plenty she didn't know. No one had told her, for instance, that

# Away

**EXCLUSIVE** One insider's shocking charges of corruption, mismanagement, and sloth against the custodian system that is supposed to take care of our city's schools

**By Eric Pooley**

the system was designed to fail. Or that the custodians—who can earn \$83,000 a year (more than teachers or cops) and have fat budgets, nepotistic staffs, and taxpayer-funded fax machines, computers, microwaves, and Jeep Cherokees—had the contractual right not to clean their schools. Or that supervisors like her might get slapped down if they tried to do something about it. Why should her bosses tell her any of that? They were part of the old-boys' network. She was just a woman.

If anyone had filled her in, D'Alessandro would have ignored him. She had spent her life defying the expectations of men, working three years in a boiler room to get the "steam time" needed for her engineer's license. Then invading the heating and refrigeration trades and now the board's Division of School Facilities. She'd always been audacious, but on this day in 1989 she was a lazy custodian's bad dream—a smart, wiry Brooklyn woman banging on the office door of a shirking custodian named Carl Spechar.

The door didn't open, so she found a security guard and asked, "Where's Spechar?"

"He's in his office."

"No, I just knocked," she said. "He didn't answer."

"He never answers."

D'Alessandro phoned Spechar from a nearby office, and he agreed to let her in. He was a spry septuagenarian with gray skin, gray hair, and a lip that curled as he told her about all the things his contract said he didn't have to do.

"He was the Grinch," says D'Alessandro. She asked him when his staff would be scraping the gum off the floors.

"Not before my retirement."

D'Alessandro asked why the swimming pool had been closed for a year. Spechar said a NO RUNNING sign had to be posted on the wall. D'Alessandro noticed a sign stuck in a corner; was that the one? Spechar said it was.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Nobody told me where to put it."

"You lowlife, put it anywhere," said D'Alessandro. She asked Spechar about his payroll, which she says had room for two of his sons but not an engineer to run the high-pressure steam boiler that heated the school. City regulations require a steam engineer on duty when the boiler is running; Spechar had a license, but when he left the building he was breaking the code. "As an engineer, I was offended by that," says D'Alessandro, 43. She went back to headquarters and asked her bosses, deputy plant-operations director Kirby Coughlin and chief of custodians Lucian Cappoli, to help her bring Spechar into line. But she says Cappoli and Coughlin—both former officials in Local 891, the custodians' union—told her to leave Spechar alone.

"Kirby told me it wouldn't be 'viable,'" says D'Alessandro.

She went after Spechar anyway, meeting with Barbara Jaccoma, a Board of Ed lawyer who told her how to file a disciplinary motion. Jaccoma also phoned Coughlin—the subtle de facto boss of school facilities whose charity toward custodians leads some to call him "the Monsignor"—and told him what D'Alessandro was up to. D'Alessandro says Coughlin was livid with her. (Coughlin, 53, says he doesn't remember the call.) Jaccoma told D'Alessandro not to worry; she was right to take action. D'Alessandro returned to her office, where the phone was ringing. She says it was Cappoli, the Monsignor's No. 2 man. "I want you to go up to the Bronx," he said. "And don't come back."

D'Alessandro had been transferred to the office of John Fratangelo, 45, the borough plant manager for Manhattan and the Bronx. Like Coughlin and Cappoli, Fratangelo was a former union insider. He had a neat mustache and a fondness for sharp suits and dumb jokes. He also had a daughter who worked for Carl Spechar.

HE TRANSFER WASN'T PUNITIVE, THEY ASSURED HER. But it ended D'Alessandro's action against Spechar. The action against D'Alessandro, however, had just begun. She claims that an extended family of union members—a brotherhood of brooms—persecuted her for two offenses: being female and forcing custodians to do their jobs. Her crimes, she says, were serious enough to get her fired. And her story is one Rudy Giuliani and schools chancellor Ramon Cortines should hear now, before they launch yet another attempt at reform.

An all-American symbol of corruption, mismanagement, and sloth, the Division of School Facilities spends \$350 million a year, ostensibly to clean and maintain the city's 1,069 school buildings. In fact, the division has allowed the schools to crumble—blaming a lack of money when another cause is a lack of accountability (it ignored evidence of systemwide asbestos contamination until parents rose up in fury last year). The division's titular head is a financier named Amy Linden, 38, who knows more about bonds than boiler rooms; critics say she has ceded control of the division to Coughlin and his crew. ("I haven't ceded control to anybody," says Linden, noting that "under the parameters of the contract, there's only so much we can do" about bad custodians. She declined further comment.) The cronies preside over a hermetic system that has nurtured some memorable characters: the custodian who got paid for lolling around on his boat, the one who liked to smoke pot and shoot guns in his school basement. The system prevents principals from punishing such men or rewarding good ones—custodial ratings, like the centralized cleaning-and-maintenance operation, are controlled by Coughlin and his men.

D'Alessandro says she broke ranks with that system, hectoring bad custodians and helping good ones. She took on anyone she thought was hurting schoolchildren—like the principal who was using six school bathrooms as personal storage closets. D'Alessandro says her bosses blocked that action; it was too harsh an "attack." After too many attacks, she was hounded from the division.



Manhattan and Bronx plant manager John Fratangelo.

## The custodians can earn as much as \$83,000 a ye

In a gender-discrimination suit filed against the board and seven school-facilities officials, D'Alessandro charges that the wave of harassment began in 1990—immediately after she began organizing Board of Ed craftswomen and testified at a city Human Rights Commission hearing on women in the construction trades. Before D'Alessandro took the witness stand, Fratangelo had given her a favorable evaluation; her knack for getting custodians to clean their schools had won her the gratitude of parents, principals, and superintendents ("If all of your supervisors are of such high caliber, you are indeed fortunate," one principal wrote to Fratangelo). After D'Alessandro testified, Fratangelo suddenly found her performance "inadequate." Within 48 hours of her appearance at the hearing, he filed the first of fifteen disciplinary memorandums against her.

Coughlin and Fratangelo deny any gender bias. "Nobody's saying she didn't clean up a few schools and help some people," Fratangelo says, "but she couldn't perform her managerial duties. She berated people. She had big problems being told what to do."

Everyone agrees that D'Alessandro was a troublemaker; what's in dispute is whether her brand of trouble was just what the system needed, and whether her bosses labeled her a *feminist* troublemaker—"a crusader," in the alleged words of Hugh Bovich, 38, the blustery, quasi-literate 300-pound borough manager (and union president's nephew) who finally did her in.

"You don't need management training to deal with these guys," says D'Alessandro about the cozy union relationships. "You need incest training."

In her suit, which is being heard by an administrative-law judge at the Human Rights Commission offices in lower Manhattan, D'Alessandro and her lawyer, Robert Felix, argue that the school-facilities bosses undermined her authority when she tried to get



Amy Linden, the custodians' titular boss, is now under fire.

custodians to perform. When she gave lousy ratings to lousy janitors, they say, the bosses bumped the numbers up. They wrote her up for fictitious errors and minor infractions, then slammed her in kangaroo-court "counseling sessions." They falsified the minutes of these meetings, she claims, so she made covert tape recordings of them—and they brought her up on charges for doing so. They spread rumors about her personal life and warned others not to talk to her. When she complained to the board's human-resources representative, she says, she was told that filing a formal complaint would "cause problems" for her career.

Those points are in dispute, but this much is not: Her bosses bounced her from borough to borough and scoffed at her claims of bias. She filed a formal complaint with the Human Rights Commission, and two weeks later, on March 15, 1991, she was fired.

"This woman couldn't be trusted because she didn't play by the rules," says Charles Rosen, who teamed up with D'Alessandro when he was co-president of the parents' association at La Guar-

corruption, and poor performance that may be unequaled in public service." The managers tolerated these rogues and sometimes were related to them. The gun-happy custodian who used his school basement as a firing range, for instance, is the cousin of D'Alessandro's chunky tormenter, Hugh Bovich. Custodians convicted of serious crimes aren't barred from their jobs but have their cases referred to Monsignor Coughlin, who told Stancik he "plays Solomon"—often deciding whether they can keep their jobs without even making an informational call to prosecutors.

The charge of union cronyism "has been thrown at me many times," says Coughlin. "I don't buy it. The chancellor used to be a member of the teachers' union. We have brought accountability to this system! I see my union background as a positive, not a negative."

School Facilities also bears blame for the board's ongoing maintenance crisis—an operation so mismanaged that 44,000 backlogged repair orders were simply thrown out this year. Eight hundred of the system's 1,000 school buildings have problems with heating and ventilation. (Bovich, who oversees a third of those buildings, refers to "heating and ventling" five times on his résumé.) In January, an investigation by Eric Greenberg and Lynn Hancock of the *Daily News* provided startling details about maintenance—the system spent \$1.5 million on wooden windows for 174 schools, but they rotted because custodians weren't required to caulk or paint them. That led Cortines to give Linden until July 1 to get her house in order, or he would demand "leadership changes." News items reported that Linden and Coughlin were as good as gone, but they hung on to their jobs. The system also survives: The board just spent \$200,000 on a new roof for a school that will be torn down next year.

New Linden resignation rumors have swept the division, but a spokesman denied them; Linden won't comment. Sources say Cortines asked her to stay a bit longer because new scandals had hit. The U.S. Attorney for the Southern District last week charged eighteen for various bribery and kickback schemes at the division,

## and get taxpayer-funded faxes, computers, and Jeep Cherokees.

dia High School of Music and the Arts. "She was wonderful, zealous. She believed this system could be made to work. But it is, first and foremost, a jobs program. Second, it's an experimental center for the study of union work rules. Children come third, *maybe*. Susan had another idea, so of course they had to destroy her."

The lawyer representing the board, Barbara Jaccoma—the same lawyer who told Coughlin about D'Alessandro's action against Spechar—argues that D'Alessandro was a "problem employee" who was terminated for good reason. D'Alessandro was "nasty" to superiors, Jaccoma told the judge. Her infractions were real. "She's not a poor victim . . . but a poor employee who became provocative and used claims of gender discrimination as an excuse for her difficulties." She was treated better than her male colleagues, Jaccoma said, "because everyone involved wanted to retain the only female plant manager."

### The Rotten System

**W**HICHEVER SIDE WINS, THE CITY IS LUCKY TO have the case going on right now. The testimony being presented in a run-down hearing room on Duane Street sheds rare light on the custodial subculture at a time when reform is again on the public agenda and the Division of School Facilities is again in an uproar.

The latest push for reform began in 1992, with the release of a report on the custodial system by Ed Stancik, the board's commissioner of investigation. Stancik's report limned a world of offhanded venality—janitors who pursued second careers as lawyers on city time, gave no-show jobs to girlfriends, and took advantage of "opportunities for theft,



Kirby Coughlin, known as "the Monsignor" to custodians.

and the Justice Department is threatening to sue over racial discrimination in custodial hiring. Rudy Giuliani recently tore up a putatively "revolutionary" contract that Cortines claimed would check the power of the custodians but really seemed designed to lock in a long-term deal before Giuliani had a chance to privatize. Giuliani ought not to have been surprised that the contract favored the union, because a key negotiator for the board was Kirby Coughlin. If Giuliani wants his reforms to succeed, he'll take note of D'Alessandro's story, which suggests that the custodians can't be reformed unless their managers are reformed as well.



In a photo from a 1992 investigation, a custodian lolls during working hours.

"For the first time in a decade, change is possible," says John Fager of the Parents Coalition, who has been fighting the school-facilities division since 1985, when his son, a first-grader at P.S. 87 in Manhattan had to eat lunch in a cafeteria that violated the health code. Fager knows better than to be *too* optimistic. "Whatever they do with the rank-and-file custodians," he says, "won't work unless they also go after Coughlin and the the bosses—this pack of wolves living inside the henhouse."

**T**HE HENHOUSE IS AN IMPOSING BUILDING IN LONG ISLAND CITY, Queens. Coughlin and Cappoli work there, but Linden spends her time in an office at 110 Livingston Street, the board headquarters—a neat symbol, her critics say, of an out-of-touch executive. Linden has ultimate authority over custodians and maintenance, but no previous experience with either. Her background is in bond offerings and capital-funds management. She led the task force that created the School Construction Authority, lost her bid to run that agency, and landed atop the school-facilities division in 1988. "Amy's consolation prize," says a ranking board official, "was our loss. She is stubborn, hardworking, and in over her head."

Linden forced the would-be reformers from her division—the last to go was building-services director Vincent Cara, D'Alessandro's only defender in upper management—and left key positions unfilled. The vacuum was filled by Coughlin. "Amy is totally dependent on Kirby, and he treats her like a mushroom," says someone at the division. "In the dark and covered with shit. There is no way she can get a straight answer from her subordinates."

"She is the kind of intellectual who's easily taken in by streetwise custodians," says the board official. "People have tried to get her to see what it means to be so reliant on a union crony, but she can't see it, or won't. She still wants to think of herself as a reformer."

Coughlin has been the *acting* director of building services since Cara left, more than two years ago. Linden won't promote him, sources say, because doing so would require a board resolution, and the board members can't stomach his ties to Local 891. So the quiet, press-shy Monsignor remains in the background, running the show. He served as the board's liaison to a consulting company that spent \$200,000 of city money on a report that found "no compelling reason" to privatize. The board's experiments with pri-

vatzation have had mixed results, and sources at the division say part of the reason is that Coughlin wrote contracts that put the private firms at a disadvantage—a charge he denies.

"Privatization isn't working because Kirby doesn't want it to work," says a colleague. "He still finds it difficult going from the union's point of view to management's. After all, he became a custodian in 1969. He was the union's borough boss. He's a compassionate guy, and Local 891 is his family. Kirby trying to reform the system is like a doctor trying to operate on his own child."

"I'm in favor of privatization," says Coughlin. "Competition is good."

Cortines has asked an independent panel of real-estate types to decide what to do about the school-facilities division; the panel will issue its report next spring.

In the meantime, Cortines's latest reform plan, by decentralizing to the borough level, would hand *more* power to managers like Fratangelo and Bovich. The privatization plan that Giuliani is contemplating will likely fail if it is implemented by these men, because they are opposed to the very idea of privatization—after all, it would steal jobs from their union brothers. "We can negotiate a better contract," says Labor Commissioner Randy Levine, who wants to try contracting out the cleaning of a third or more of the schools and may start bargaining with the union this week. "But we can't negotiate the structure of the school-facilities division. The chancellor can and must deal with this, all the way up to Amy Linden."

## D'Alessandro took a concealed recorder

### Reformism Redux

**T**HE CUSTODIAN SUBCULTURE REQUIRED 100 YEARS to evolve to its present state, "and it would take you another hundred to appreciate the conspiracy," says someone inside the system. "I watch them operate and I think, This is a masterpiece."

For most of the century, the custodians have been both city employees and independent contractors—protected by civil-service regulations, given annual budgets, and allowed to hire their own staffs, pay for their own supplies, and keep whatever was left. The reward for shoddy work was more pay. In 1964, a special investigator told the *Times* that some custodians earned \$53,000, making them "among the higher paid individuals in the country."

A series of reforms chipped away at union prerogatives, requiring custodians to return unused budget money to the boards and to stop hiring their relatives (they skirted this by hiring *one another's* relatives). Despite challenges, "the system still seems impervious to change," an insider says. "I look for soft spots, and I don't find them." The union protects itself by keeping knowledgeable critics out of the contract talks. Vinny Cara, who cracked down on maintenance men cooking lavish lunches on board time, was used as a bargaining chip. "Get rid of Cara," the union told Linden, "and we'll make concessions." Cara now works for the Department of Corrections. The concessions never came.

In 1988, the union agreed to a ballyhooed reform. For the first

time, supervisors would no longer be drawn from the same union local as custodians. "Plant managers" would be brought in from the outside, but the bosses who hire and supervise them would be the same former custodians and union cronies. The result is a layer of outsiders sandwiched between two layers of union brethren. In 1989, Susan D'Alessandro was hired to join the plant manager layer. Soon enough, she started feeling squeezed.

## Fighting the Good Fight

**D**'ALESSANDRO WAS TOLD THAT HER HIRING WAS PART of a revolution in the division. "They were looking to change the culture of the board," she has testified, and she was certainly a change. Raised near Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, she attended St. Agnes Seminary, dropped in and out of Fordham, and then took advantage of an offer to enter the trades. Growing up alongside four brothers, she'd found that she liked mechanical work.

Starting as an engineer's apprentice at a housing complex in 1982, she got her "steam time" and worked her way up to supervisor and then chief engineer, earning licenses for refrigeration and fuel oil along the way. By the time she joined the board, she was probably better trained than Bovich and Fratangelo, because the custodial system eases the requirements for steam time. That's why real engineers call custodial engineers "brooms." Fratangelo got his steam-engineering education from a correspondence school. He spent eleven years as a custodian, serving as assistant to union honcho Arthur Salvadore. In 1989, he was promoted from custodian to borough plant manager—leapfrogging from one school to responsibility for 370. An affable man who likes Italian suits and annoying jokes, Fratangelo mistrusted D'Alessandro at first, then came to depend on her. He even backed her efforts to clean up some bad custodians.

"They let me do the job as long as the custodian I was working on wasn't connected," she says. "The trouble was, I never knew exactly who I was talking to—a boss's brother-in-law? Godson? I had to find out who was touchable and who was untouchable."

## meeting with a superior. It was spotted and wrestled from her.

Fratangelo vehemently denies the charge. "I supported all my plant managers when they were right," he says. "We brought accountability to this system! No one is untouchable."

Supervising District 3 in Manhattan, D'Alessandro helped clean up some notoriously bad schools; Fratangelo started putting her in charge of the office when he wasn't around. Most custodians, she learned, "weren't ogres at all. They simply needed a level of supervision they'd never had. They got away with things because they *could*. I had many custodians who were helpful, supportive; I was a happy person."

Principals were happy, too. "I remember when Sue D'Alessandro came into my school," says Shirley Mayo, a former principal at Wadleigh Junior High in Harlem. "I was shocked. 'Oh, my goodness, a female.' A crack in the boys' armor. She was assertive, and she got my custodian turned around—he started changing light bulbs and putting out rolls of toilet paper and mopping floors! Amazing! No wonder they got rid of her."

In February 1990, D'Alessandro began organizing craftswomen who worked for the board. The National Organization for Women asked her to testify at a hearing on discrimination in construction trades. "She testified with my blessing," Fratangelo says. "Nobody knew what she said, and nobody cared." But D'Alessandro says Fratangelo started writing her up for trivial offenses, ripping her in front of her subordinates—and worst of all, siding with them in disputes. When a custodian in her district failed to heat his building, causing pipes to burst, D'Alessandro brought charges against him—and Fratangelo cited *D'Alessandro* for poor communication skills. "She

was erratic, unstable, and abused her authority," he says.

In one example of abuse, D'Alessandro denied permission to a custodian who wanted to leave school early to pick up his Cherokee. (To aid snow removal, the Board of Education pays almost half the cost of Jeeps that custodians use all year and own outright after five years.) Charges were brought against D'Alessandro for this heinous act, and she was made to grovel in front of Fratangelo, the custodian, and his union representative. Eventually, she attended a formal counseling session with Fratangelo; he invited his paddleball partner from the Brooklyn office, Hugh Bovich, to attend as "impartial observer." Bovich kept the minutes of the meeting—and kept them inaccurately, according to D'Alessandro, who made a secret tape. Asked about the discrepancies during a deposition, Bovich said, "I wouldn't have wrote it if she didn't say it."

D'Alessandro filed a number of in-house complaints but got no satisfaction; eventually, she took her case to Amy Linden, who kicked it back downstairs to a human-resources director. D'Alessandro says the director told her that if she went outside the division and filed a formal complaint, she would be fired.

In July, Coughlin transferred her to Brooklyn; he told her that he and Linden were tired of her complaints, but that she would get a "fresh start." If she had problems in Brooklyn, she'd know the trouble lay with her. She wasn't persuaded, because her new boss was Bovich. A nephew of former union president Charlie Haughey, Bovich had spent five years as a custodian and five months as a plant manager before being promoted to borough plant manager. Asked in a deposition whether his uncle helped him get the job, Bovich said no, but allowed as how he's "not such a polished guy. Maybe my vocabulary, it's not the best."

Unschooling, perhaps, but not stupid, Bovich allegedly undertook a ham-fisted but successful plan to drive D'Alessandro from the job. At one point, D'Alessandro says, he took her aside and said, "No one here trusts you"—and then told her that he would deny ever having said it (in his deposition, he did deny it). A plant manager has testified that Bovich ordered him to stop talking to D'Alessandro. In September, Bovich challenged her handling of an incident and ordered her to a counseling session. When she took a concealed tape recorder into the meeting, the 300-pound

man saw it and wrestled it out of the 115-pound woman's pocket. D'Alessandro called the police. Bovich cited her for carrying the device, then typed out six new memos about other alleged problems. He got some of his dates mixed up—reprimanding her for things she must have done on days off—and she challenged him. Their obsessive memo-writing war went up the chain of command to Coughlin, who sided with Bovich. "Any further infractions," he told D'Alessandro, "could lead to termination."

On November 24, D'Alessandro filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission. Two weeks later, Bovich handed her an evaluation that failed her in nine out of ten categories. She appealed to Coughlin, but on March 15, 1991, she was fired.

**T**HREE YEARS LATER, HER CASE HAS NOW MADE IT TO trial. Administrative-law judge Steven Presberg will be hearing arguments through July; this week, the board begins presenting its side, portraying D'Alessandro as an abusive employee with a pattern of crying discrimination. They will introduce evidence of D'Alessandro's 1975 marijuana bust, and say they could have denied her employment because of it. Judge Presberg's ruling should come by year's end, unless D'Alessandro accepts a settlement offer before then. That isn't likely. She pressed her case with a ferocity well known to lazy custodians, and she did it for one reason.

"I want my old job back," she says. "I want to be vindicated. I want to go in on my first day and be a plant manager again.

"Then, on my second day, maybe I'll quit." ■