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Keeping Illinois Wesleyan in its comfort zone

Name: Ron Roth

Position: Assistant Engineer of Environmental Services

Years with IWU: 11



Roth performs general maintenance with a 48-inch pipe wrench, which he says is reserved for “the really big jobs.”

says Roth. “People only really know we’re here if something goes wrong. You can have a light on 365 days of the year, but when it’s out, you know where to find the guy to fix it.”

Roth’s job is a lot more complex than light bulbs, however. He has been working with HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air-Conditioning) systems for more than 20 years, 11 of those with Illinois Wesleyan.

Somewhere deep within the lower levels of Dodds Hall, in a maze of gray sheet metal and hissing steam pipes, a voice crackles over a walkie-talkie. “Ron, you there?”

“I’m in Dodds,” answers Ron Roth, adding wryly, “Where else would I be?”

To the uninitiated, it can feel disorienting, even a little scary, to stand in the midst of churning, whirring noise emanating from the massive heating-cooling units that run day and night and keep the University comfortable. But for Ron Roth and the University’s other Physical Plant engineers, it’s just a typical day at the office.

Roth is at Dodds to check his previous day’s work, in which he and several colleagues installed a 1,000-pound compressor to a unit in the four-story residence hall, which houses 155 students. The installation was no small feat, considering the narrow spaces and tight corners they had to navigate. “I don’t think the engineers liked us very much when they designed this room,” he says with a laugh.

Dodds is one of more than 30 buildings managed by seven engineers, divided into three teams. Despite the ground they cover in a typical day, “we’re pretty invisible,”

The campus HVAC system maintains safe, comfortable working and living environments in all University-owned structures. The system includes everything needed to monitor and adjust indoor air and water temperatures, humidity levels, and air quality and circulation. While some newer buildings on campus have independent HVAC systems, the older structures use steam, distributed via underground pipes and produced in large boilers at the campus Heat Plant, from the Shirk Center on Emerson Street.

Maintaining these systems is a science, but also an art, where instinct and experience — as much as gauges and dials — tell Roth and the other engineers if something isn't functioning up to par.

"You smell that?" Roth asks after descending the steps into Evelyn Chapel's basement. He motions to a box with multicolored wires. "Something's off here. Could be a coil. Don't touch it." It's a warning hardly needed with the many stickers and signs declaring dangers all around the room.

For all the climbing of stairs, ducking of pipes, and weaving around the labyrinth of heavy equipment, Roth is easygoing — though his job keeps him constantly on the go. After making rounds to all 10 of their buildings, Roth and his team will return to fix anything out of sorts or answer calls waiting for them. "We try to please everybody and make them comfortable," he says.

That can be a challenge. Indoor temperatures on campus vary greatly from one building to another, and even within a specific structure. Some buildings are especially tricky, such as Holmes Hall, the University's administrative headquarters. "Holmes is my pet building," says Roth with a smile — but calling it his "baby" might be more apt, given the aging hall's often cranky disposition and all the TLC required to coax it to the proper temperatures.

Then there are the ever-fickle elements. "We try to anticipate what the weather will do first thing in the morning and adjust for the day," says Roth. "You can imagine how easy that is in Illinois. The Midwest loves to throw curve balls at you." Add to the mix the fact that the University strives for maximum energy efficiency and one begins to grasp the challenges of Roth's job.

To deal with those challenges takes patience and discipline, which Roth says he learned during his nine-and-a-half years with the U.S. Air Force, where he was first introduced to the HVAC trade. "I went in to work on jet engines," he says. "They made me a carpenter, which wasn't for me. I had a friend who worked with heating and cooling units, so I asked to be transferred."

The military runs in Roth's family. His parents were in the Air Force. His brother Jeff is in the Illinois Army National Guard and currently serving in Iraq. Roth's wife, Stephany, works full-time for the Peoria-based Illinois National Air Guard, to which Roth also belongs. "In peacetime, we really just make sure the base is comfortable," he says of his HVAC training. "In wartime, we'll support the aircraft and maintain anything in the base that is critical for facilities. We make sure they will be able to make war."

The mission may be different, but Roth finds meaning in his job at Illinois Wesleyan. "We maintain the environment for students and professionals. Without the students, we would not be here. If they are not comfortable, they cannot learn. Same with the professionals."

Ironically, Roth's own office — in the University Heat Plant on Emerson Avenue — is not air-conditioned. His cubicle sits under orange and red pipes and numerous buttons and switches are within reach. After checking his phone messages, Roth descends down the steps to the boiler room, a vast basement, where an enormous fan drowns out much of the noise of the massive but intricate machines. Roth approaches the University's smallest, and oldest, boiler, which handles the lighter summer load by itself. He leans over to check a gauge under a black metal plate that reads Erie City Iron Works. "This baby is more than 45 years old and still working," he yells over the din. Content that everything's in working order, he ascends the steps that lead to the building's exit.

Outside, the traffic from the streets sounds calming and quiet. "Yeah, it's safe to say I love my job," Roth says. "Though when you're working on an air-conditioning unit on a roof and it's 95 degrees, you might question that," he adds with a chuckle.

With the possibility of being sent to Iraq with his Air Guard unit as early as this winter, Roth has learned to take things one day at a time and enjoy life as it comes, whether it's spending time with his family, playing drums with a local rock band, or keeping the University's HVAC systems running smoothly.

"It's nice to wake up and say, 'This isn't such a bad thing I do.' I plan to retire from here someday," he says, looking up at the clear blue sky. "That's the plan."



At the Illinois National Air Guard in Peoria, Roth walks beneath one of the numerous planes on display at the base.