



# Capital Pride

*Facility manager Janis Wilson gives U-Store's D.C. location a personal touch.*

*By Tom Comi*

A female customer recently waited for a moving truck en route from Philadelphia at U-Store's Washington, D.C., facility when things quickly took a turn for the worse. The truck with her belongings broke down, and it became clear that she was going to miss her scheduled flight out of town that evening.

When the customer burst into tears upon realizing her plans had come unraveled, U-Store manager Janis Wilson did what came natural.

"Janis hopped into action with a cold bottle of water, brought the customer around to our desks for some privacy, helped her calm down, and worked out a plan of action," recalled Matthew Fensterwald, whose family co-owns the facility. "Janis was able to help her get her flight changed at no extra charge, extended our access hours, stayed after hours, and waited for the movers to arrive."

To some, that might be considered going beyond the call of duty; for Wilson, it's all in a day's work. And it's been that way ever since she first started working on and off at the New York Avenue location in 2005. In fact, she recalls

a similar experience with a young couple expecting their first child. The baby was born after the facility closed, but Wilson made sure the father had access to his unit so he could retrieve the car seat.

"He stopped in to thank us for being understanding and supportive, because if he had not had the extended access hours he would not have been able to pick up mom and child until later," she said.

## Power City

U-Store was formed in 1975 by friends Harry Sellers and Bernard "Bud" Fensterwald, Jr. (Matthew's grandfather). They started with a site in Daytona Beach, Florida, and went on to add another eight locations in the D.C. metro area. Since both original partners have passed away, the second generation of Bernard Fensterwald III and Richard Sellers have taken on the responsibility of running and growing the company.

The New York Avenue facility holds the distinction of being their only location in the District, and it comes with many quirky features and even some history.

"The parking deck is the roof, and the majority of the facility is underground, giving us one of the largest loading areas

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*Above: Matthew Fensterwald, Janis Wilson and John Makolo at U-Store's facility in Washington, D.C.*

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in this cramped city,” the younger Fensterwald said. “We are still family owned and operated for over 38 years and have been in the D.C. area longer than any other company.” Being in the most powerful city in the world brings U-Store some pretty important customers, including someone very close to President Obama.

“We have a diverse population of politicians, commissioners, lawyers, doctors and other professionals and, of course, our homeowners and apartment renters,” Wilson said. “Most recently we had the campaign manager for the president of the United States, for the first election and the re-election as well.”

Said Fensterwald: “It is a wonderfully diverse place to work and live. I meet people from all over the world every day. We’ve had multiple politicians, government groups and organizations.” He then added jokingly, “But if I told you who, I would have to kill you.”

### A Friendly Face

While catering to the powerful and wealthy brings in valuable revenue and provides some bragging rights, U-Store’s bread and butter is renting to the average storage customer. Much of connecting with that base begins with Wilson.

Born in Alabama and the fourth of 11 children, Wilson is now the widowed mother of four and grandmother of six. That explains in large part where she gets her nurturing skills. When asked what makes her special, Fensterwald didn’t hesitate to say, “*She* is what makes her special.”

“Janis is a very strong woman and runs a tight ship, and we have done better every year that she was worked at this location,” he said. “We are blessed to have her here.

If you are having a bad day, she will pick you up and put you back together.”

Wilson said part of what makes her an effective manager is dealing with every current and prospective tenant individually.

“I enjoy meeting the many different people and being able to provide them with a service,” she said. “I also like to offer them tips on storing and how to cut back on costs of over-renting a space. My greatest strength would probably be making sure each and every customer is made to feel safe, comfortable and know that I am accessible to them if they have any situation that I could assist them with.”

That doesn’t mean Wilson always deals with pleasant customers. While pushing back might be the first instinct, she said it’s important to understand why the person is unhappy.

“First, don’t engage in a verbal confrontation with a disgruntled customer,” she cautioned. “Give the customer the opportunity to explain what his or her dilemma is. Offer the customer a bottle of water, coffee, tea, or just to have a seat, and see if you can get them to calm down. Listen to what they have to say; then, if at all possible, try to meet their expectations and resolve the issue.”

Fensterwald said calming down unhappy tenants is one of Wilson’s greatest strengths.

“Janis is a very strong woman,” he said. “She can look a person straight in the face and tell them how it is; but unlike other managers who would let the customer leave the store, she will stop them, say it’s going to be okay, and work with them to fix the problem.”

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Having a great personality is obviously a big part of customer service, but Wilson said managers should never cut corners. She prides herself on being prepared for any situation that may arise, and said that ultimately leads to future business.

“Knowing the nature of the self storage industry makes a huge difference,” she said, referring to contracts and being able to answer any questions. “Service is what your customer is looking to receive first, storage next. We work hard at establishing relationships with our customers. Word of mouth is the best form of advertising, and every customer could result in many referrals, which in turn produces more revenue.”

In a city where lobbying and advice can cost a small fortune, what free advice would she give to storage employees looking to get into management?

“I would tell prospective managers to realize there are many different reasons why people need storage, so don't assume anything,” she offered. “Let your customers tell you what they are looking for, and make sure you treat your customer and everyone that walks through the door of your facility the same way you would like to be treated if you were the customer.”

Wise words from a wise woman. ❖



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