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STREET
HEROES
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UNIVERSITY
"I'm trying to help RMIT get on with its project, while helping these people get on with their PhDs and their lives."
Phil Francis
Manager, Electron Microscopy
Office of the PVC SEH
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Good Vibrations

Phil Francis and the ultra-sensitive electron microscopes in the facility he manages have been tested by the NAS construction project but a deep-seated desire to do the right thing by his colleagues has seen him and his team manoeuvre through some operational obstacles.

"Science demands honesty," says Phil Francis the manager of RMIT's $24 million Microscopy and Microanalysis lab facility, which is home to nine highly sensitive super-powerful microscopes.

The popular facility, which can make atoms visible to the human eye, is used by 100s of post-graduate students each year for their research.

"It's very complex, very expensive and very delicate," Phil says of the lab's hardware and the slightest vibration, even a door slamming, can affect months of work.

"So, if you bump it, you've got to say, 'I'm sorry I may have ruined your experiment'," says Phil.

That's the level of honesty required when you are working in a research environment, which goes part of the way to explain why Phil, who's worked at RMIT for 40 years and managed the lab for the past six, tells it like it is.

Located in Building 14 on level 7, Phil and a team of two technicians and three microscopists have been working shoulder-to-shoulder with the NAS construction works since 2015 – and he's the first to admit that it has been tough and stressful at times.

One of the biggest challenges has been the impact of power outages – as switchboards have been replaced – on the sensitive instruments in the lab. "These instruments don't like being turned off," he says.

While the builder's needs have been governed by urgent construction deadlines Phil has taken a more methodical approach.

"I've tried documenting everything, learning everything. It's part of the normal research process, we document it all, record it all, make notes.

"You learn and you actually get better and better at shutting off the instruments …and by the time it's all over, we'll be experts at it – but we hope we never have to do it again."

While working around the impacts and distractions of the construction environment Phil juggles and adjusts priorities.

With work not scheduled on Sundays, it became a more popular time to use the facility, so Phil changed his work schedule to accommodate how researchers adjusted to the construction impacts.

"I've been coming in on Sundays now, for over a year, taking Monday off to compensate. That is to support and help people who are willing to come in on a Sunday."

A self-confessed veteran of RMIT Phil says his networks and in-depth knowledge helped others identify and manage issues as the project moved along.

"It was no big deal for me to sit in a meeting with the builders and occasionally hear a few items that will impact our operation. You just carry-on and deal with the problems but for the most part it was not too unexpected.

"To be fair they've got a massive project to deliver," he says of the building contractor and there were inevitable challenges as Phil and his team called out the risks and the builder juggled time constraints and deadlines.

The youngest of five kids Phil says he has always been, "the tag-along helper" and it has defined his approach to his work – helping people, supporting them as they move through various stages of the RMIT life cycle.

RMIT has been my life. I met my partner here at RMIT. Many of my colleagues have come through as undergraduates, post-graduates, post-doctorates and employees. We feel like we can all identify with it (RMIT), we're like family.

And with family, comes a sense of responsibility, which goes part of the way to explain why Phil is so passionate when it has come to doing the right thing by his lab, his colleagues and the broader RMIT community.