ELA Day 3 - The Inside Scoop

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The Inside Scoop

by Michael Stahl



In New York City, one of the most popular brands of ice cream comes from a company called Mister Softee. Mister Softee sells ice cream to children and adults alike right out of a large blue-and-white truck. One particular Mister Softee truck driver is named Gus Elefantis. He has not only made Mister Softee ice cream his career, but the tasty, smooth ice cream has helped him make a few friends, too, since he first bought a truck in the mid-1980s.

Gus Elefantis's summer days begin at about 8 a.m. when he and his wife, Lola, wake up to make breakfast for their two daughters. Once breakfast is finished, Gus and Lola leave their daughters at home (the oldest daughter is 18 years old and capable of babysitting) and drive 20 minutes to a very special parking lot. It is there where Gus parks his very own Mister Softee ice cream truck every night alongside about a dozen others.

As soon as they arrive, Lola begins cleaning and stocking his truck, inserting all of the local favorite types of ice cream pops and flavored frozen ices into specific freezer **compartments** to be sold once Gus drives along his route. "Everything's in the same place every day," says the short, blonde lady. "This way, my husband doesn't even have to think!"

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Gus agrees, saying he won't even need to glance inside the freezer as he fills orders for the long lines of customers waiting on the sidewalks.

Watching his wife wipe down the sink, the refrigerator and the slushy machine, Gus explains that Lola has cleaned the truck for over 20 years, ever since they were first married. "She's the best at it," he says with a heavy Greek accent. "I've tried to clean the truck plenty of times before, but I'm no good at it. When Lola cleans, it is spotless."

Gus's morning duty is to "go shopping" and purchase any new stock the truck needs for the day. He buys these items from his old friend Dimitri Tsirkos, who got Gus into the business and now runs the Mister Softee station. The station consists of a few parking lots for the trucks and a store where drivers buy supplies. Into a shopping cart Gus loads a few cartons of chocolate and vanilla ice cream mix, which will later freeze up inside the truck's dispenser machine. He adds a can of whipped cream, some blue paper cups and a gallon of strawberry syrup.

Lola has finished cleaning Gus's truck. Tupperware containers of sprinkles are filled. Gallons of milk are placed just behind a steel refrigerator door at Gus's feet. Chocolate sauce that hardens when chilled is poured into a bowl for Dip Cones. The truck is finally ready.

After unplugging the back of the truck from a wall outlet that is used to keep the refrigerators and freezers inside running overnight, then starting up and revving the engine for a while to warm it up (the truck itself is over 30 years old), Gus drives out of the garage to sell ice cream in the neighborhood he's called home for over 40 years: Astoria, New York. Gus will spend between nine and ten hours driving around, jumping from the driver's seat to the serving window countless times. This takes a toll on a big man's body. "You're walking on steel all day," he says. "Talk to any Mister Softee driver and they'll tell you that their legs from the knees down are a problem."

Though there is an air conditioner in the truck that isn't completely useless, its work is made more difficult by the heat coming from the refrigerators, not to mention the sweltering humidity in New York City's summer air. The back of the truck is searing on days when temperatures climb above 95 degrees, which are also some of the least **profitable** days because customers stay inside their air-conditioned homes. Naturally, rainy days hurt business as well. How much money the drivers make changes from year to year, depending on the weather. Gus remembers one year, though, when the weather was so cooperative, he started driving in February and didn't stop until Thanksgiving! "I made a lot of money that year," he says with a nod of his head.

Usually, Gus doesn't drive the Mister Softee truck for more than six months a year. He works every day it doesn't rain between April and October, unless there is an important family event or holiday like Greek Easter. A day spent inside his home is a day he's not making money, so he'll put in 12-hour days as often as he possibly can. On those days he misses his daughters, Joann, the older one, and Nora, who is eight.

After a long summer season and parking his truck for winter, Gus searches for a new winter job to provide for his family. "Once I drove a cab, but that was too much driving in one year for me," he laughs. "Usually, I work part-time in construction or at a restaurant just like when I was young." In some ways, he would love a **stable**, everyday job, he says. But with Mister Softee, he's his own boss, which has its perks.

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"I eat ice cream every day," Gus says, admitting that he dips into his own supply, usually after accidentally making something a customer didn't ask for, like a cone with chocolate sprinkles instead of rainbow. "I feel like I have to eat the mistakes. I don't want them to go to waste!"

When he's had enough ice cream for the day, he gives his errors away, no charge. Gus loves giving away free ice cream, which has gotten him a lot of fans. However, the people of Astoria don't go to his truck just for ice cream-whether it's free or not-they also go to see their friend.

"My husband loves everyone," says Lola. "Adults, kids, pets. It doesn't matter."

The side windows of the truck have few stickers, making it easy to see into the back where Gus works. This was done on purpose. He feels it makes parents much more comfortable dealing with him because it shows he has nothing to hide. Gus doesn't drive his route late at night because he knows the truck's song will get kids to jump out of bed. During the daytime, he plays the song only once per block to limit the disturbance.

"My mother always told me that if you live in a glass house, don't throw stones at your neighbors. And I live in a glass house," he says, referring to his windowed truck. He calls the job "easy," despite the long hours away from his daughters while they're on summer vacation, the heat, the hurt in his legs, and the requirement of a new job every winter. But Gus Elefantis isn't going anywhere, to the delight of the many Astorians with which he comes into daily summer contact. "Unless I hit the lotto," he says, "which I don't play, I'm not going to stop."

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Vocabulary

compartment

noun

definition: a part or area of something that is divided off as a section of the whole.
The jewelry box has eight compartments.

Spanish: compartimiento

profitable

adjective

definition: of a business, bringing in more money than is spent; financially successful.
Mr. Hughes's business is profitable and well run.

Spanish: rentable, provechoso, lucrativo

stable

adjective

definition: not easily changed; lasting a long time.
A stable job will help her support her children.
We are lucky to have freedom and a stable form of government.

Spanish: estable

forms: stabler, stablest

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1. Before you start reading...

Here are the vocabulary words that will be in this reading. Let's see how well you already know them.

Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
compartment				
profitable				
stable				

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2. Word Changer

Words have different forms when we use them in different ways. Write the correct vocabulary word, in its correct form, in each blank.

The jewelry box has eight _____ .

Mr. Hughes's business is _____ and well run.

A _____ job will help her support her children.

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3. After reading and exploring the words through some activities...

Do you know these words better? Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
compartment				
profitable				
stable				

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Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. What does Gus Elefantis do during the summer?

A. Gus Elefantis teaches Greek to tourists.

B. Gus Elefantis drives an ice cream truck.

C. Gus Elefantis works on a construction site.

D. Gus Elefantis waits tables at a restaurant.

2. What is the sequence of events in a summer day for Gus?

A. Gus gives away ice cream for free; Gus goes shopping for supplies; Gus drives around to sell ice cream.

B. Gus gives away ice cream for free; Gus drives around to sell ice cream; Gus goes shopping for supplies.

C. Gus goes shopping for supplies; Gus drives around to sell ice cream; Gus gives away ice cream for free.

D. Gus goes shopping for supplies; Gus gives away ice cream for free; Gus drives around to sell ice cream.

3. Many people in Astoria like Gus.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

A. "However, the people of Astoria don't go to his truck just for ice cream-whether it's free or not-they also go to see their friend."

B. "Gus's morning duty is to 'go shopping' and purchase any new stock the truck needs for the day."

C. "Gus Elefantis's summer days begin at about 8 a.m. when he and his wife Lola wake up to make breakfast for their two daughters."

D. "The side windows of the truck have few stickers, making it easy to see into the back where Gus works."

4. What is one problem with Gus's job?

A. Gus buys the items he needs for his truck from a friend.

B. Gus works in Astoria, New York.

C. Gus's job causes pain in his legs.

D. Gus's job allows him to interact with people.

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5. What is this passage mostly about?

A. an ice cream company called Mister Softee

B. the neighborhood of Astoria, New York

C. different flavors of ice cream

D. the work of an ice cream truck driver

6. Read the following sentence: "Gus agrees, saying he won't even need to glance inside the freezer as he fills orders for the long lines of **customers** waiting on the sidewalks."

What does the word **customers** mean?

A. people who get into trouble

B. people who work hard

C. people who are mean to others

D. people who buy things

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Gus likes some things about his job _____ not others.

A. in summary

B. above all

C. but

D. after

8. Name two things Gus likes about his job.

9. Name two things Gus does not like about his job.

10. Gus says that, in some ways, he would love a stable, everyday job. Why does he choose to be an ice cream truck driver instead? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

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