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SU offers a vast array of housing options, while placing a new emphasis on linking students' academic and residential worlds

BY DENISE OWEN HARRIGAN

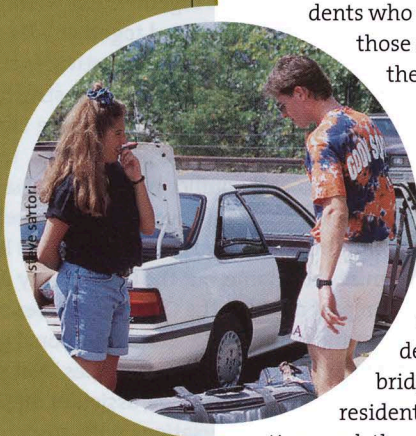
Suffering from a serious case of freshman jitters, Lori Zisk Rosner '76, G'77 pulled up in front of Shaw Hall in fall 1972. Members of the Goon Squad—the University's official welcoming committee, then 500 students strong —“practically attacked our car,” Rosner remembers. “They carried everything to my room, answered a million questions, then returned that night to answer more questions.”

It was the warmest of welcomes, but it ended when the Goon Squad left the residence hall that night. “After that, I don't remember getting much direction,” Rosner says. “When it came to registering for classes, meeting faculty, and making academic connections, I was on my own.” The outgoing Rosner persevered and eventually became a resident advisor (RA) and Goon Squad president. “Adjusting to a school as big as Syracuse was a scary experience,” Rosner says. “You survived it, but you didn't forget how frightened you were at first.”

When Jamey Van Epps '03 arrived last fall, settling into SU was far more structured—and supportive. After his own big Goon Squad welcome, Van Epps was escorted into the cocoon-like School of Management Learning Community in Boland Hall. This intensive, semester-long residential experience is designed to help students establish roots—fast. Van Epps spent his first weekend at an off-campus ropes course, bonding and team-building with the 25 first-year management students who would share his classes that semester. Some of those classes were held in a cozy study lounge down the hall from his room.

Van Epps says the carefully orchestrated learning community gave him a sense of family, and a jump start academically. “In a class where you know everybody, you speak up a lot more,” he says.

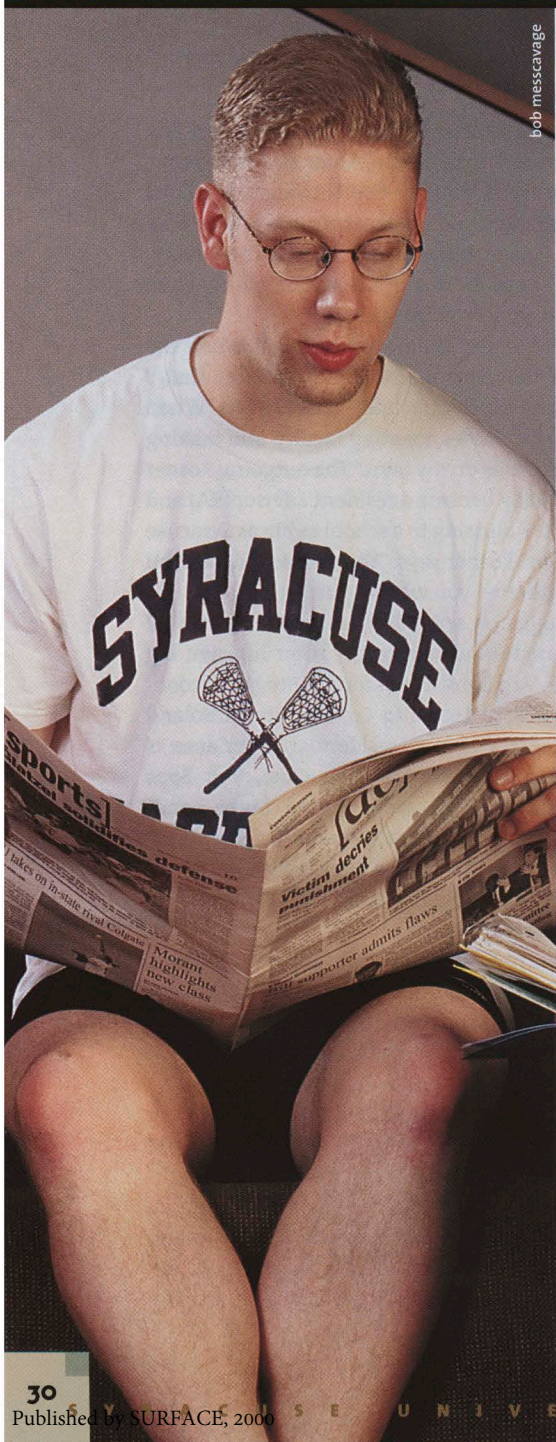
The three-year-old School of Management Learning Community represents a bright new residential option for first-year students—and a growing conviction that building bridges between the University's academic and residential worlds boosts student satisfaction, retention, and the quality of learning. This year there are five



“Seven of us from that floor really clicked, and we’ve lived together ever since.”

—SUMMER SHERIDAN

School of Social Work student



theme and learning communities in SU’s residence halls, each with a distinct focus: Management, Honors, Women in Science and Engineering, Multicultural Living/Learning, and Leadership Challenge. Students also can live on theme floors designed to support certain lifestyles, such as wellness or substance-free living.

The University’s goal is to steer at least 25 percent of its 7,000 residential students toward learning communities or theme floors. Students who opt for more traditional living quarters—a room, suite, or apartment in one of the University’s North Campus residence halls, houses, or South Campus complexes—may also notice a more hands-on approach to their living experience. Across the nation, universities are concluding that—in contrast to the laissez-faire approach that Rosner experienced in the 1970s—a more closely guided residential experience accelerates learning and personal growth.

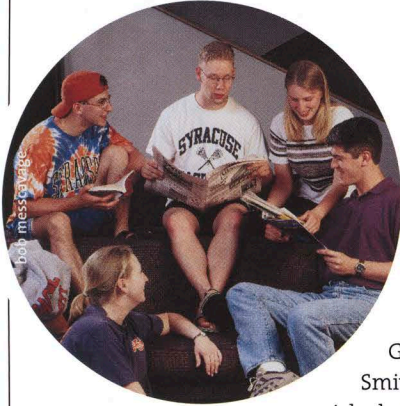
Much of SU’s emphasis is on first-year students. “For students away from home for the first time, the major issue is a need to connect with a peer group,” explains Barry L. Wells, vice president for student affairs and dean of student relations. “If they don’t find that peer group, they become anxious and sometimes dysfunctional. It’s hard for students to make these connections on their own. Committed faculty and residence life staff can make a world of difference.”

When School of Social Work student Summer Sheridan ’01 moved into Lawrinson Hall as a freshman, her energetic RA, Kristin Refkofsky ’99, planned plenty of activities to calm and connect the new residents. “The first night was a welcome meeting with getting-to-know-you games,” Sheridan says. “You had to hook up with someone who wasn’t your roommate. Then we all painted our study lounge. These activities continued until the end of the semester, when Lawrinson RAs organized study groups for students taking the same courses.”

As a result of this togetherness, Sheridan reports, “seven of us from that floor really clicked, and we’ve lived together ever since.”

Often there’s more to floor activities than meets the student’s eye. “These are what we call ‘intentional’ experiences, structured to produce very specific learning outcomes,” explains Office of Residence Life Director Thomas E. Ellett, who designed a detailed Community Action Plan to unobtrusively teach such skills as diversity awareness and conflict resolution. “The Community Action Plan gives us a framework for conducting weekly floor meetings and accomplishing tasks like setting community standards,” says Shaw Hall RA Alicia Clifford ’02. “Students wouldn’t recognize it by name, but the Community Action Plan is an important tool for RAs.”

In past decades, the Office of Residence Life worked to keep students safe, but had no grand plan for accelerating personal growth. “In the old world of residence life, we told students: ‘These are the rules.’ Not much thinking was required on their part,” explains Stephen St. Onge, assistant director of residence life. “We still have rules, but we also have conversations with students about larger issues like what it means to be a community.”



Clifford agrees that “residence life today is very student-centered. In the past—as recently as when I was a freshman—the RA played more of a police role, stepping in when there was conflict,” she says. “Today, we empower students to handle their own issues with other students. This prepares them for problem solving in the real world.”

During his first weeks in Shaw Hall, Jared Green '01, a civil engineering major in the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science, picked up some valuable conflict resolution skills. “I had always shared a room with my brother, so I knew the frustration of being distracted when I was working,” says Green. “At floor meetings, I learned there’s a constructive way to approach people who get rowdy when you need to study. Instead of banging on their door and yelling at them, you can quietly say, ‘I have a test tomorrow. Could you please tone it down?’”

Rebecca S. Dayton, a clinical psychologist who directs SU’s Counseling Center, applauds the focus of such floor meetings. “So many issues emerge when you’re living with other people,” she says. “Our culture doesn’t do much to help young people negotiate conflict. Many young adults either think way too much about themselves and don’t care enough about others, or they let others take advantage of them. Most students don’t yet know how to balance those situations. That’s a developmental skill you need to work on in college.”

Last spring in *The New York Times*, critics called the trend toward more structured residence halls “a kind of infantilization of the student body.” Dayton disagrees. “I admire our residence staff for helping students tackle issues like handling conflict,” she says. “Over the past 10 years, studies show a steady decrease in college students’ confidence in their own emotional health and a steady increase in their levels of psychological stress. By increasing our support, we give students the confidence to deal with more problems on their own.”

Residence halls are also getting into the business of leadership development and community service. Case in point: the Office of Residence Life’s popular GOLD (Growth Opportunity and Leadership Development) Experience, a six-week leadership course based on the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. And last spring Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw honored two residence hall groups, the DellPlain Hall Community Service Club and the Booth Hall Council, with Chancellor’s Awards for Public Service. “Today’s students are more service-oriented,” reports David Brown, former assistant director of residence life. “Things are going well in our society, and students want to give something back.”

To continue to meet its objectives, the Office of Residence Life has a professional staff of 26, plus 152 student RAs, who play a far greater role than hall monitors and Code of Student Conduct enforcers. “I feel responsible for creating a community out of the 32 girls on my floor,” says Lawrinson Hall RA Donna Cameron '01, who pays special attention to first-year students. “You’re a guide for students, especially during their first year. The first few weeks can set the tone for an entire college career.”

Shaw Hall RA Clifford enjoys serving on the front lines of residence life. “You can’t solve every problem,” she says, “but you can put your hand out there and let students know you’re available. You touch people’s lives, and they touch yours.”

bob messcavage



M

ELDING STUDENT LIFE AND ACADEMICS



bob messavage

With the resurgence of the learning community (SU dabbled in this medium in 1975, with the Shaw Hall “Live-and-Learn Center”), the responsibilities of the residence life staff often cross into academia, and faculty responsibilities cross into the residential arena. The notion of merging academics and student affairs is almost revolutionary in the highly specialized world of the American research university, according to Ronald R. Cavanagh, vice president for undergraduate studies. “There is no tradition for this crossover,” he says. “Specialization is central to the research university, but we want to create a seamless undergraduate experience where faculty and students share in the imaginative integration of our values and messages. We’re all in this together.

“The learning community finally brings coherence to an otherwise bewildering variety of college experiences,” Cavanagh says. “Students with a common curriculum live together and share classes. The most effective learning occurs when there is significant time spent on a task. Learning communities enable students to put in time without realizing it. They wind up talking about classes and assignments. One student says, ‘I can’t do that,’ and another says, ‘Yes you can, and I can help you.’

“Good things happen in learning communities,” he concludes. “Students stay longer, have higher GPAs, take more difficult majors, and feel very good about themselves.”

A learning community is especially appropriate when the curriculum is challenging—as is the case with the School of Management, where freshmen must quickly learn teamwork and tackle a daunting gateway course. Last year, 26 freshmen elected to undertake those challenges, fortified by the school’s learning community. The semester begins with a ropes course, designed to turn the young strangers into partners. “The ropes course is an essential component,” says School of Management professor Sandra Hurd, who serves as faculty coordinator for learning communities at SU. “It forms the initial bond that predisposes this group to be a community.”

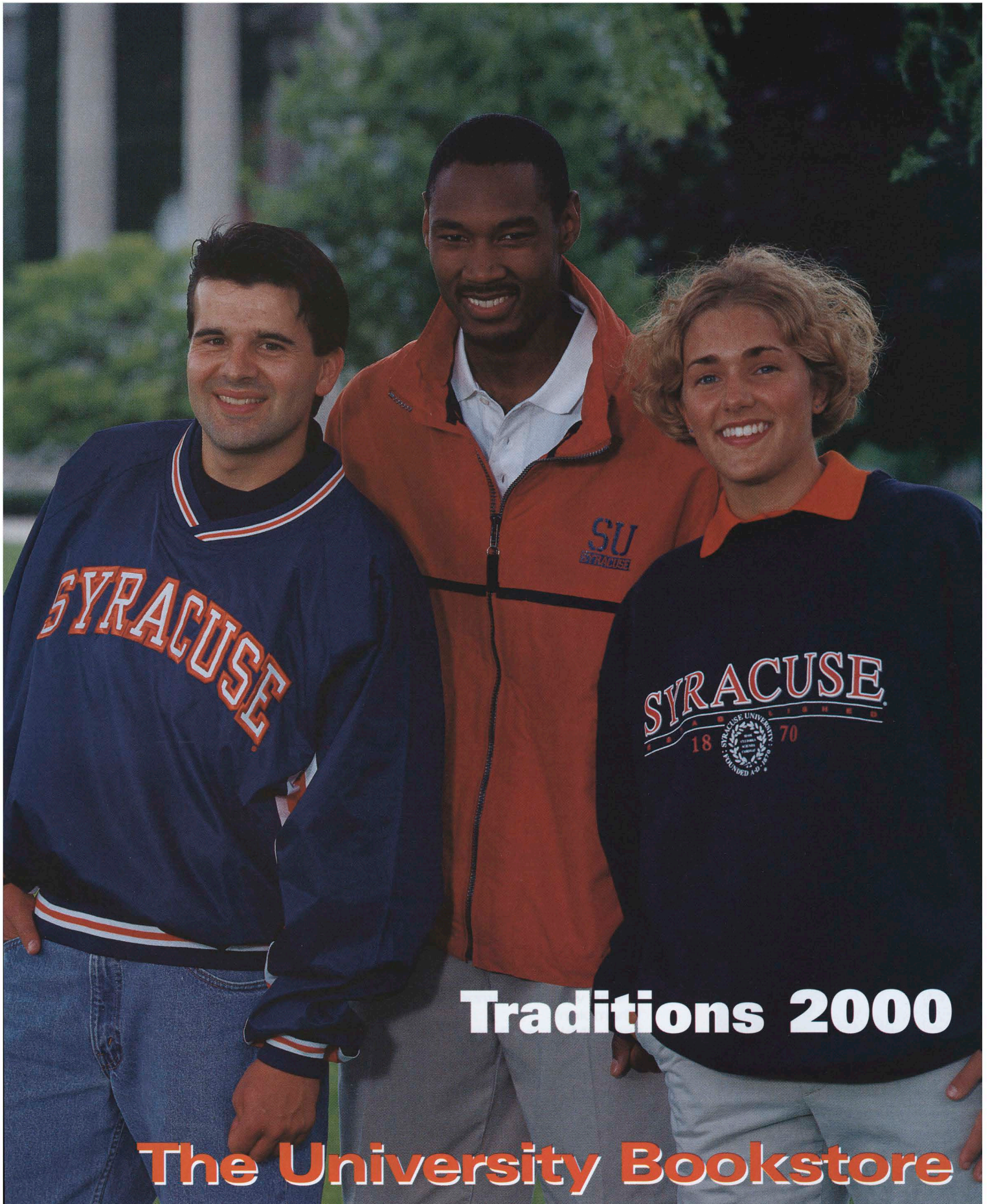
Jamey Van Epps says the course promoted trust among students. “It brought our relationship to a whole new level,” he says. “We had to work together to accomplish something. That team spirit persisted throughout the semester.”

Proximity is another major advantage of the learning community: “When you’re stumped by an assignment,” adds Kalen Pascal ’03, “you waltz out of your room to the next room and say, ‘I don’t get this.’ That’s a big plus.”

The learning community also holds classes in the residence hall, improving interaction between professors and students and creating a more relaxed atmosphere. “We had some classes right in our lounge,” Van Epps says. “Students could come in their PJs. It was great.”

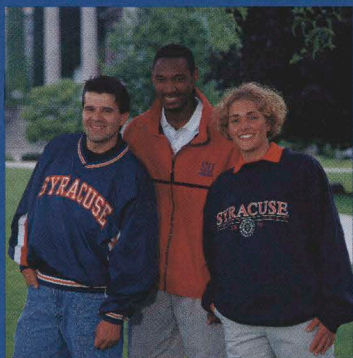
According to Hurd, faculty invest a good deal of time in the learning community. “Teaching is not limited to formal classes,” she says. “There are teaching lunches and brown-bag lunches and informal chats in the residence halls. When there is this degree of interaction, faculty are in sync with students and less likely to take a forced march through the syllabus.”

The impact of all this personal attention is dramatic, Hurd says. “The quality of the learning community’s work is so extraordinary that I posted it on our web site. These



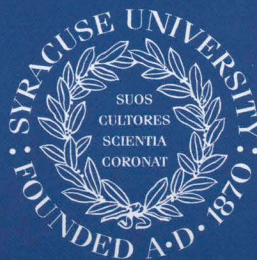
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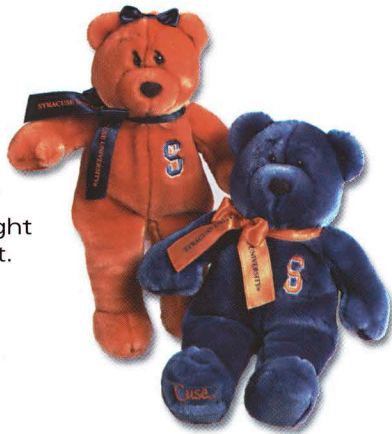


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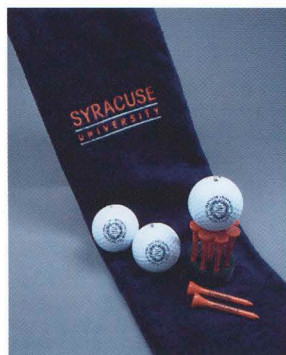
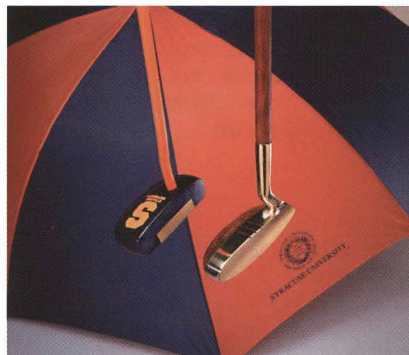
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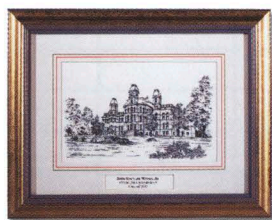
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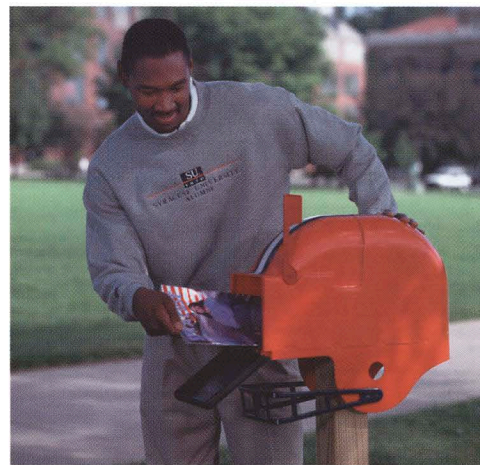
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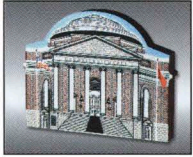
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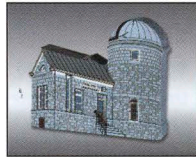
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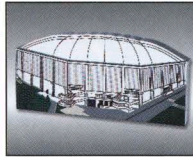
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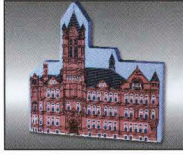
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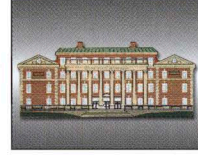
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students are already assuming leadership roles in the School of Management. I'm sure there are many management students shaking their heads and saying, 'I wish I'd checked that box for the learning community.'

"National data suggest that learning community students do better academically," Hurd continues. "It could just be time on task; these students can't walk away from their academic life. They monitor each other and feel a responsibility for getting everybody to class. We all know it's easier to go work out, or go to a class, with a buddy."

Nance Hahn, former assistant director of SU's Writing Program, taught the management learning community students in a series of writing workshops designed to demystify the process of writing "the big bear papers" like industry analyses. Hahn, who's taught writing since 1986, offered the workshops in the evening at the residence hall.

"I consider myself pretty flexible and eager to make my courses more user-friendly, but this is the first time I've taught students in bunny slippers," Hahn chuckles. "At that time of day, and on their own turf, students seem looser, more willing to talk. The residence halls are really hopping at night. There's a lot of writing going on, and students are reading each other's papers. If every faculty member went into the residence halls occasionally, this would be a different campus."

S HARING LIFE THEMES

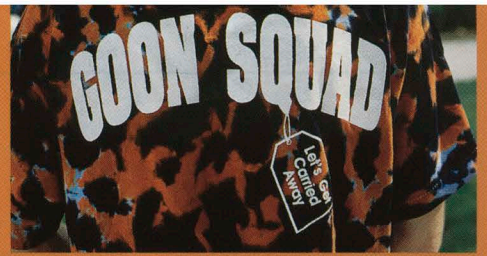
Students who crave a strong sense of community—without an academic component—may live on one of SU's theme floors, such as the Wellness or Living in a Substance-Free Environment (LIFE) floors in Shaw Hall. "These floors are based on shared values," explains Teresa Metzger, Shaw's residence director. "The year starts with a combined retreat for both floors at an off-campus site. There's a lot of campfire stuff and bonding. The students do health assessments that measure their physical, mental, and emotional health, and the weekend culminates with setting goals for the semester."

Wellness Floor resident Curtis Dahn '01, a music composition major in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, calls the retreat "awesome." "I formed several friendships that are still strong," he says. "The Wellness Floor is really inclusive; there's a real sense of acceptance. And there's always something interesting happening on the floor."

There is no stereotypical student on the Wellness Floor, now in its ninth year. "To these 70 students, wellness simply means being the best you can be," says Wellness RA Alicia Clifford, who arranges weekly wellness programs that range from Tae-Bo classes to meditation sessions. "We all bring together our strengths on the wellness model: physical, social, emotional, occupational, spiritual, even environmental health. Wellness students have ambition. They're eager to get to know each other. They're ethnically diverse, into open dialogue, and big on self-expression—pictures, poetry, writing. People here look beyond their own worlds and respect differences."

Students whose definition of wellness resolutely precludes alcohol or other drugs may opt for Shaw's LIFE Floor, which also has a strong sense of community. "Some people don't want to deal with those shenanigans," says Bryanna Parr '01, RA on the LIFE Floor. "The people who live here are here a lot. They're not out drinking on weekends. We have a lot of social programming, like trips to the movies and the mall, and a lot of spontaneous fun, like Frisbee in the mud."

"We're like a family here," says floor resident Howard Johnson Jr. '03, a television-radio-film major in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. "We hang out. We laugh. We horse around. We call it the Shawliday Inn."



Greetings *from the* GOON SQUAD



steve saltori

If there's one constant in University residence life, it's the ever-upbeat Goon Squad. The University's official greeters, the indispensable "Goons" literally and figuratively extend a hand when apprehensive first-year students arrive at their residence halls each fall.

"We're all volunteers," explains Sarah Nels '01, a two-year veteran of the Goon Squad, which currently numbers about 200 students. "Some of us are goofy and funny, while others just bring their muscles. On Opening Weekend, we carry luggage, show freshmen where to go, and welcome people to the University. We answer a million questions. Parents sit us down on the bed and quiz us about our experiences. They seem to feel that if you're a good kid, their kid is in a good place.

"It's like a big party," Nels adds. "There's music and barbecue all day long. At the end of the day, you're very tired. But it's a good tired. You've given something back to the University. You've helped someone at a crazy time in their lives."

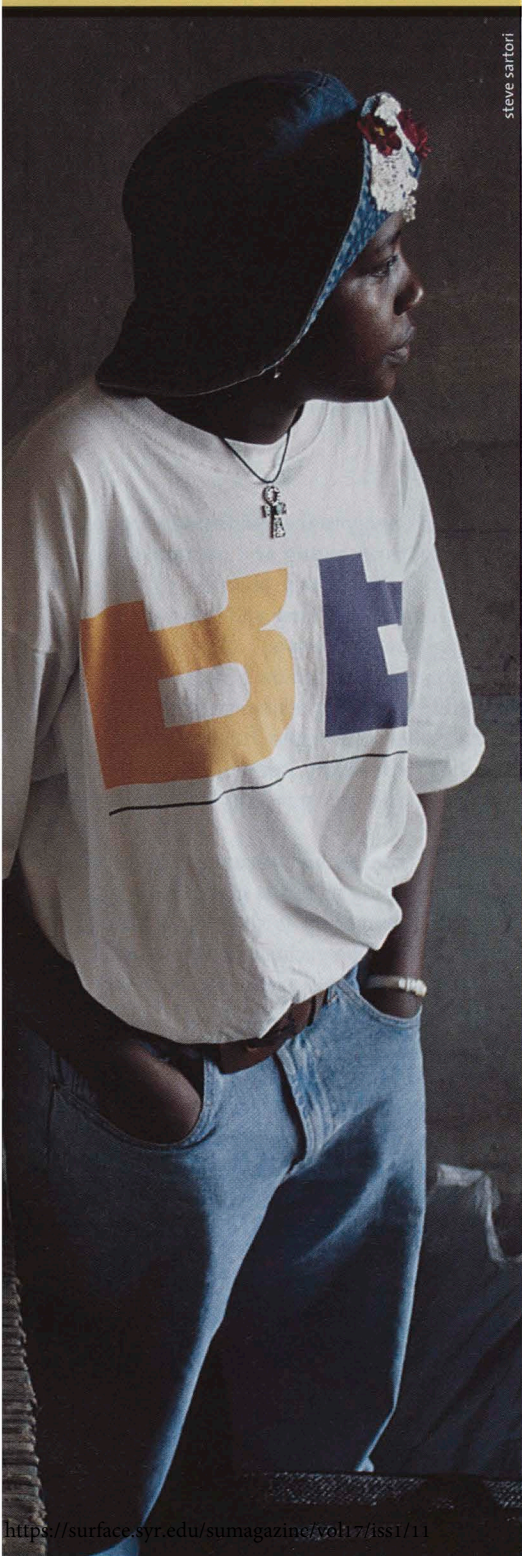
Lori Zisk Rosner '76, G'77 has indelible memories of her first encounter with the Goon Squad. "I still remember their orange Jiminy Cricket shirts. I was so amazed by their spirit," says Rosner, who was later known as "Mama Goon" for her central role in the organization.

"There were 500 Goons in my day," Rosner reports. "On Opening Weekend we would paint an orange stripe down the center of University Avenue. On Parents Weekend, about 50 of us would put on a show in Crouse College, spoofing the stereotypes of students and families. I'll never forget how much fun it was, and how good it felt to help the freshmen through that scary experience."

—DENISE OWEN HARRIGAN

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PROMOTING DIVERSITY



steve sartori

Learning communities and theme floors play a major role in SU's New Opportunities in Student Living Proposal, due to be implemented in 2001. At that point, entering first-year students will have the options of living in a learning community or on a theme floor—or accepting a random residence hall assignment. Traditionally, SU freshmen have requested specific residence halls.

The proposal, endorsed by the University Senate, aims to enhance diversity within residence halls and strengthen the link between the academic and residential aspects of student life. It was initiated by the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Office of Residence Life in response to suggestions made by the Chancellor's Commission on Pluralism, the institutional self-study done for the recent Middle States accreditation review, and the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Diversity. The proposal notes that "although the University recruits a diverse population of students, it does little to ensure diversity in daily living. New students tend to self-segregate, choosing a residence hall with which they're familiar or where their friends will be.

"The unintended result," the proposal concludes, "is a residence hall that is perceived to be predominantly African American and Latino—or one that is all white. Although it is natural that students might find support in an environment with 'like' students, it also serves to perpetuate students' feelings of discomfort with 'unlike' students."

The new plan still allows students to self-segregate—but "with choices that let students find 'like' students based on factors more truly inclusive than ethnicity, color, or socioeconomic background."

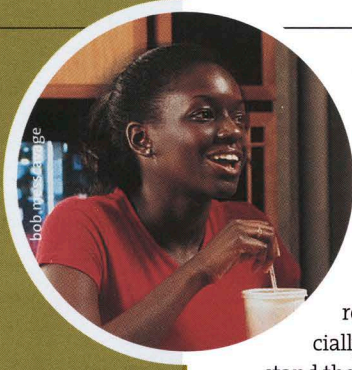
Wells is confident the initiative will improve the campus culture. "If we value diversity on this campus, as we say we do, we have to challenge the 'isms' in our society," he says.

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—BARRY L. WELLS

Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Student Relations

Although she will graduate before it goes into effect, Fiona Phillips '01, a child and family studies major in the College for Human Development, supports the new plan. Phillips fits the profile of a "self-segregating" student. As a freshman, she opted to live in Brewster/Boland, where she spent a multicultural weekend before she enrolled at SU. For a roommate, she requested a high school friend from the Bronx. When Phillips moved to South Campus as a sophomore, she requested an apartment close to her African American friends. "If there had been a diversity initiative when I was a freshman, I would have gone with the flow," Phillips says. "I see people as individu-



als, and I'd be comfortable anywhere. My first experience with people of other races was freshman year, on our little wing in Brewster/Boland. We had Asians, Caucasians, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans. On the other side of the floor there were all white students, but they spent a lot of time on our side. Our RA pulled us all together. You realize when you live with people from other cultures that you have more similarities than differences."

For students who wish to dig into diversity issues, the new Multicultural Living Learning Community—open to all SU and SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry students—was launched this fall in Haven Hall. "Our focus is racial and ethnic issues," reports Dale West, Haven's residence director. "Our goal is to examine our own identities and those of other cultures—especially African American, Jewish, Asian, Native American, and Latino. We want to help students understand themselves better, then go out and become active with that knowledge."



RETENTION AND RESPONSIBILITY

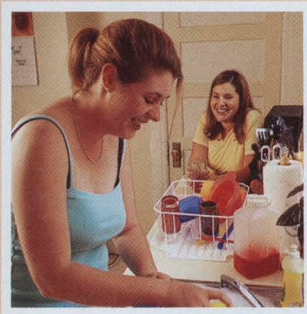
If it seems that the University is devoting a substantial amount of energy to the residential experience, it's partly because that experience affects retention. Although SU is emerging as a national leader in assessing the impact of its residential programs, it's too early to definitively measure this impact. However, Barbara Yonai, associate director of the Center for Support of Teaching and Learning, reports that SU's first-year dropout rate fell from 12 percent in 1989 to 9.4 percent in 1999.

"Overall, it's the nature of the academic experience that determines retention," explains School of Education professor Vincent Tinto, a national expert on college retention. "But residence life adds or subtracts from that experience. This University has paid a lot of attention to retention. It has poured energy into its curriculum and its buildings. It has earned national awards for teaching. Residence life is the next step in this long-term commitment to students. I don't know of another university that is quite as remarkable in this commitment."

If the University is concerned with retaining students, it is equally concerned with equipping them for useful, responsible lives. Their college residential experience is emerging as fertile ground in which to cultivate character development and important living skills. "The University is shifting its attention toward developing the whole person," explains Cavanagh. "We cannot be exclusively concerned with turning out top-notch physicists, engineers, and television producers. We also have to turn out confident individuals and committed citizens. People are looking for intelligent, flexible, problem-solving, leadership-caliber individuals who are committed to their communities."

Cavanagh believes many of these qualities can germinate in the residence halls, especially through programs like learning communities. "There is potential in our residence halls that we have not begun to tap, a power of collaboration we have not begun to imagine," he says. "No institution has yet unleashed the power of student learning—what students can do for themselves and for each other. Once students get a taste of success from learning together, they never back off. And the more students demand of themselves, the more they demand of the faculty. And when students start to really challenge the faculty, that's when you see a ball game."

Adjusting to Off-Campus Life



bob messcavage

Off campus, on schedule. For Summer Sheridan '01, each year of college represents a calculated step toward independence. She progressed from a room in Lawrinson Hall to a suite in Haven Hall to an apartment on South Campus. This summer, she moved to an apartment on Livingston Avenue.

How's the view from up there? "At first it was gross," admits Sheridan, a social work major. "Our apartment was filthy. It took us two weeks to make it livable. If we could have broken our lease and moved back to campus, we would have."

Sheridan and her six roommates—all friends from their freshman-year floor—have already called their landlord dozens of times, trying to get things fixed. "This is nothing like living on South Campus, where you call F-IXIT, and someone is at your door in half an hour," Sheridan says.

For apartment-dwelling students, there's also the realization that the University—and the City of Syracuse—now closely monitor large off-campus gatherings. "I've seen more police off campus than I ever saw on campus," Sheridan says. "I consider myself and my roommates a nice group of girls. But the whole reason we moved off campus was to have parties. If you live off campus today, you live by the University's rules. I know a student whose party was raided, and she ended up doing community service for violations to the student conduct code."

On the positive side, Sheridan says, "we have huge bedrooms out here. Now that it's clean, we love what we've done to our apartment—and we have a year to enjoy it."

May graduate Jennifer Palange '00 enjoyed her off-campus experience. At the start of her senior year, she and a friend moved into a cozy garret on Sumner Avenue after a daunting apartment search. "You have 3,000 to 4,000 students all searching in a very small area," she says. "But we lucked out and took the third place we looked at."

Palange and her roommate paid \$330 each, plus utilities, for their snug, two-bedroom attic apartment. "The heat rose from the lower floors, so our utility bills weren't bad," she reports. "And when we called our landlord, he called right back."

Palange enjoyed the fact that her street "had a lot of real people. We had a 2-year-old across the street and a lot of junior-high kids on skateboards." For fun, Palange would often invite friends over for dinner.

There were, however, major advantages to living on campus. "It's safer, you meet a lot of people, and you don't have to worry about power bills," Palange says. "But our apartment was much bigger and much quieter—and you don't feel like someone is baby-sitting you."

—DENISE OWEN HARRIGAN