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The UT Experience

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THE UT EXPERIENCE

A Senior Honors Project
In Partial Fulfillment of
Bachelor of Science with University Honors
in Journalism
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Christopher J. Kirk
May 2005

Faculty Mentor: Robert Heller, Associate Professor
Journalism/Electronic Media

Christopher J. Kirk
Abstract
THE UT EXPERIENCE
May 2, 2005
Faculty Mentor: Robert Heller
Journalism/Electronic Media

Looking back on my college experience, I realized I had grown a lot during the four years I was in Knoxville. Who shaped my perceptions? Where had I gone? What did I do? Why did I change? How did I grow?

For my project, I examined my growth over my college career at the University of Tennessee. Then, looking at the experiences, I determined some of the most important events and people that shaped my growth. I then put together a short slide show detailing, in photographic form, those events, places and people that were so important to my development.

With the help of photojournalism professor Rob Heller, I accompanied an analysis of my growth with photographs cataloguing my experience in Knoxville. I determined that the people who had the greatest influence on me were my friends, specifically those I met through playing club lacrosse and living at the "Lacrosse House."

THE UT EXPERIENCE

“I think I might like photography,” I told my dad. “Maybe I can do something with that when I go to college.”

“Well, what about UT?” he asked. I could hear the anticipation in his voice. He graduated from UT’s school of journalism. I practically grew up on the Knoxville campus. He always wanted me to return to his alma mater. “They do have an excellent journalism program.”

That’s how I remember it starting my sophomore year of high school. I had been taking a photography class at Brentwood High School for a few weeks. We finally got to play in the darkroom, and I had a blast. So I talked it over with my dad.

Up until then I had crossed the University of Tennessee off my short list of places to go for college. I thought I wanted to go to a smaller school. I am an only child, and this small fish thought he would feel more secure in a small pond.

But those thoughts began to fade with one conversation with my dad. My fate was sealed after the first time I took the ACT test.

“If you get two points higher, you can go to a state school for free,” my guidance counselor told me after showing me my score of 29. Three tests (and long, long Saturdays) later, I had my 31, and was Knoxville-bound to major in journalism, with a political science minor.

FRESHMAN YEAR (2001-2002)

I came to the University of Tennessee in August 2001 a naïve 18-year-old freshman. I had grown up in the suburban “Brentwood Bubble”: almost entirely white,

upper-middle class, very affluent area about 10 miles south of Nashville. I was ready to experience new things.

My graduating class was 425 strong. Of that number, over 100 decided to come to UT. So I already knew a lot of people coming to Knoxville. But the student body was large enough that I could “lose” my fellow Brentwood graduates and meet new people, if I so desired.

I knew I would meet a lot of people through club lacrosse. Unlike varsity sports, club programs do not get much money from the school. Club teams are completely member-driven. They rely on player dues, fundraising, sponsorships and donations to pay for any expenses of the season.

Because it is not supported by the athletic department, the lacrosse team is not as serious a commitment as a varsity program. But the players still take it relatively seriously because the team belongs to the Southeastern Lacrosse Conference (SELC), and plays against rivals like Florida, Georgia and Vanderbilt. I thought the commitment level was a perfect fit for me, because I came to school on scholarship, and had to maintain a 3.0 GPA to keep it.

I played lacrosse all four years in high school, and several of my Brentwood teammates played on the UT team. Therefore, I already had an “in” into a social circle before I even stepped foot on campus. Socially, the lacrosse team is sort of like a fraternity. Teammates often hang out and form close friendships. Several members even live together in a house at the corner of 13th Street and White Avenue. This house would be the site of many of the events that made my college career the experience it was.

I lived in North Carrick Residence Hall with my longtime friend Adam Logan. I've known Adam since preschool. We lost touch during elementary school, then he moved into the house across the street from me just before we began middle school.

People told me not to room with my best friend, because we would get tired of each other, spending so much time together. I figured we would be able to work any problems out, so I took the chance. What I didn't plan on was the amount of time his girlfriend, Melanie would spend in our room.

My experience living with Adam taught me a lot. We did have little fights occasionally, but, as I anticipated, we were always able to make amends. However, his relationship with Melanie shaped how I would look at my relationships with the opposite sex.

I did not think their relationship was very healthy. They were always doing the things that Melanie wanted. If Adam did anything outside of the dorm, it was with Melanie. She was always in our room, and they did not mind showing their affection publicly. All of this made me uncomfortable. I decided that year that I would fight very hard to retain my independence and individuality in any relationship. I wanted to make sure I had a say in my relationships.

I made it through my freshman year relatively easily. I did not party very much, and was able to earn a 3.9 GPA. I was very proud of this, as I wanted to start my college career off on the right foot with a nice, high GPA.

As the spring semester drew to a close, I had to think about where I wanted to live the next year. I could live with Adam again. He was going to live in Andy Holt

Apartments. While it is still a university residence hall, students share a bathroom and kitchen with two or three other roommates.

I would have been fine with this arrangement, but I wanted to move into off-campus housing. One of my lacrosse teammates, Laurence "Larry" Tilley, asked me if I wanted to live with him and two other teammates, Patrick Bergstrom and Trey Hamilton.

After thinking it over for a long time, and consulting with my parents, I decided to move off campus. I decided that my friendship with Adam may become more strained after living together another year. For the sake of our friendship, I decided space was the best thing for each of us.

I also wanted to get to know these new people more. They seemed like great guys. We spent a lot of time together during the lacrosse season. They all liked to party, and I was looking for more social experiences than I had my freshman year. But I still needed to maintain my GPA.

I told the guys that, and Larry flattered me by saying, "That's why we want you to move in with us." As it turns out, they all did a little too much partying that year. They thought my study habits would be a good influence on them. After hearing that, I was confident I would have a good time, but not so good a time that my studies would suffer.

SOPHOMORE YEAR (2002-2003)

The entire summer I was looking forward to my sophomore year. I was starting to mature and grow as a person. My need for independence was strengthened in only the first few months of my college career. I was ready to move back to Knoxville, to leave the nest for another successful school year.

I moved into College Park Apartments with Larry, Trey and Whitley Prince about a week before classes began on my sophomore year. Patrick decided to transfer to a school closer to home, so Larry's friend Whitley took his place.

This was the year that Larry and I began to become close friends. From the beginning he seemed to include me in more of his social activities. Whitley was an engineering student, and he didn't have much free time because of his amount of coursework. And Trey stayed in close contact with his friends from high school that were also at UT. I did not particularly like hanging out with his friends because I always felt like an outsider when I was with them.

But Larry came to college to meet new people. He was not interested in merely staying in his established social circle. And, since I was looking to meet new people also, we ended up spending our leisure time together.

In addition to the anticipation of moving into the more independent surroundings of an off-campus apartment, I was also looking forward to the classes I would be taking that semester. I would finally take my first journalism classes. I was glad to be done with biology, Spanish and other general credit classes. I was ready to work toward my major.

I performed very well in my introductory journalism classes. Newswriting just seemed to come naturally to me, and I quickly grasped valuable editing techniques. My father, also a journalist, instilled in me a drive write effectively, free of grammatical and spelling errors. The psychological need to correct such errors was in my head before I even stepped foot on campus. But these classes gave me the tools to be an effective writer, editor and wordsmith.

In addition to writing courses, I was also able to take a photojournalism course. I have always wanted to be a well-rounded person. And in the highly-competitive communications industry, one must be a “Jack of all trades” if he or she expects to get a job straight out of college. While I did not want photography to be my entire focus in the journalism field, I understood the value of a tool such as comfort with a camera.

But this class was not just one necessary card in my deck of journalistic skills. It was also one of the most interesting courses I have taken at UT. The instructor, Rob Heller, made me think about photography in many different ways. In order to succeed, students had to really analyze their subjects. They could not survive in the class on snapshots. They must be creative in their usage of point of view, vantage points, composition, lighting and even Adobe Photoshop.

Near the end of my sophomore year, I got a phone call from Mindy Tate, editor of *The Review Appeal*, a community newspaper in Franklin, Tenn. She offered me a paid internship for that summer. I was ecstatic. I would get to test the skill I learned in the classroom in the real world. So I instantly accepted the offer to work part-time as a general assignment reporter.

My daily responsibilities would include writing obituaries, wedding announcements, event notices and even a couple feature stories. In addition, I was to fill in for the police beat reporter full-time while he was away on vacation. To say that I was intimidated would be a gross understatement.

Looking back on the stories I wrote that summer, I can see that I still needed a lot of work. But it was a great experience. I was able to do many different things, including writing, taking and editing photos and further familiarizing myself with word processing

programs and Photoshop. I was also able to see just how hard I would have to work to succeed in journalism. It's a dynamic and exciting field. But it's not a field where the work comes to you. You have to go out and get the story.

JUNIOR YEAR (2003-2004)

Larry and I decided to remain roommates for at least one more year. But we were sick of the management at College Park. There were openings at the "Lacrosse House," an old house at 1302 White Avenue (just across Cumberland from the hill) where several lacrosse players had been living together since before I came to campus. Larry and I spent a lot of time at the house our first two years in college. And it was a lot easier to simply walk across the street to get to campus, as opposed to crossing the Henley Street Bridge, which spans the Tennessee River, every day. Little did I know how much this house would mean to me, and how much I would grow under its roof.

I met many people while I lived at the corner of 13th and White. I knew Chris Bicsak and Matt Finney from high school lacrosse. They graduated from Brentwood a year ahead of me, in 2000. As it turned out, I would form tight bonds with many of their friends, who also graduated from Brentwood that year. Although I was separated from these people by only one year, I had no idea who many of them were before I moved into the Lacrosse House.

I had the most fun of my college career at this house. There was always something going on there. Most of the time we just hung out on the front porch (if it was nice out) or in our family room, watching some TV.

One thing we liked to do was go camping. One of our friends, Shawn Cochran, had a cabin in the Cherokee National Forest. His cabin was right on Citico Creek, a

mountain stream that flowed rapidly in parts. We had lots of fun tubing down the creek and fishing for trout. At night we would gather around a campfire to cook hot dogs and talk until we could no longer keep our eyes open. We began visiting Cherokee Forest as a group in the fall of my junior year, and it quickly became one of our favorite weekend getaways.

I took my first spring break trip in March 2004. One of my lacrosse teammates, Brad Casacci, had an uncle that lived in Ft. Lauderdale. He invited us to come down and stay with him. Larry, Finney, Brad and I, plus two girls who graduated with Finney, Ashley Horne and Anna Bergman, had a free place to stay. Plus Brad's uncle, who is loaded financially, fed us several times. It was great to get away from Tennessee, if only for a week, go to sunny Florida and forget about essays and projects for a short time.

I think it was this week that I realized my attraction to Anna. I had not known her in high school, and had only met her earlier that year. But I felt like I could really identify with her, and I always enjoyed her company. I guess you could say I had a crush on her, but I was too afraid to say anything.

That summer I decided to stay in Knoxville and take a few classes so my senior year would be a little bit easier. Those summer months were the most fun I have ever had in my life. Most of the people who lived in the house stayed in Knoxville for the summer. Plus, Anna and another one of our friends, Austin Webb, moved into a house across the street from us. Every day, we would go to class in the morning, work in the afternoon, then gather in the front yard around 5 p.m. for some fun before we went out on the town that night. Then we repeated it again the next day. We lived hard for three months.

Every now and then we would take little excursions. We made several trips to Cherokee National Forest to “shoot the chutes,” as we came to call tubing down Citico Creek’s rapids. We also made a couple of trips to Finney’s lake home on Tims Ford Lake, near the Alabama border. This is arguably the best lake in Tennessee because it is not very crowded, but still large and pretty. We would take the boat out in the lake, ride Finney’s Wave Runner and fish for catfish under his dock. It was extremely relaxing, and boasted more amenities (running water, shower, clean beds) than camping.

During the summer, Anna and I began spending more time together. We ate lunch together every day after class. At first our lunches were rather quiet, as neither one of us is very talkative. But we became comfortable with each other, and were talking each other’s ears off within weeks.

SENIOR YEAR (2004-2005)

By the start of school my senior year, my relationship with Anna was primed to explode. I did not see it at the time, but we were soon to become involved romantically. After school started, we began flirting. This became more regular until, in October, we were a couple. We will have been together for seven months on May 10. We are inseparable, and I know I have found the love of my life.

I knew Anna was going to go to Vanderbilt Nursing School in August. That meant that I had to find a job in Nashville. I had no idea where to start looking. I knew I would put my resume online and apply for a state job, but these methods left me at the mercy of cyberspace. I wanted to apply for specific job openings.

So my dad forwarded me a notice from The Tennessee Magazine, a monthly magazine based in Nashville and produced by the Tennessee Electric Cooperative

Association and sent to all members of TECA, about an opening for a field editor. I did not think I had the experience for this position, but I figured that at least it would give me some experience interviewing for jobs.

I went in for the interview and nailed it. I felt very confident I would be invited back for a second interview. Weeks went by and I heard nothing. I called TECA and asked if there was anything else I needed to do. The editor told me she would be making a decision within a week, and to wait. She said they would probably invite me back.

Two weeks went by. I figured they decided on someone with more experience. So, discouraged, I posted my resume on monster.com and began filling out the online application for a state job.

Then I got the call. I remember noticing it was from the 6-1-5 area code. "This could be good," I thought. It was the editor of The Tennessee Magazine. "Great, she's going to tell me they went with someone else," I decided. I was trying to brace myself for rejection.

"We've decided to offer you the job," she said. "Are you still interested?"

I almost dropped the phone. It was all I could do calmly say, "Yes."

Coming straight out of college, I have a job. I will be responsible for writing feature stories, editing submissions to the magazine, assisting with photography and page layout and producing a newsletter to be sent to TECA board members and general managers.

This is by far the best I could hope for in a job. I believe I have a real future with TECA and The Tennessee Magazine. All of its employees have stayed with the company

for years. The benefits are great, and the salary is nothing to sneeze at. I even get my own office with a window. I can't wait to begin my career with TECA.

Moving back to Nashville puts me three hours away from the greatest spectacle on earth: UT football. I'm not sure how I'll react when I watch my first home game on TV. I haven't missed a game in Neyland Stadium in about 10 years.

Anticipating this reaction, Finney, Austin and I decided we would travel to all the away football games last fall. We called it our "farewell tour," and went to Oxford, Miss.; Columbia, S.C.; Athens, Ga.; and Nashville. Each time we stayed in RV parking lots in Austin's pop-up camper. The other RVs parked around us dwarfed that little camper.

One group of UT fans we made sure to stay near called themselves the Tennessee Travelers. They were a group of several couples that decided years ago they would travel to UT home and away games together in a fleet of RVs. Although these people were almost twice our age, they had as much fun as we did, tailgating and socializing in various campus parking lots. They traveled with plenty of food, and even towed a huge smoker behind one of their RVs. We were lucky enough to sample some of their cooking. I would give anything to have just one more taste of those ribs or twice-baked potatoes.

I now find myself at the end of my college career. I have done well scholastically, and expect to graduate with magna cum laude honors. My parents are extremely proud of me, as I was able to balance a busy social life, while taking the required courses to graduate in four years with honors.

LACROSSE

Lacrosse was a major part of my life the four years I was in college. It has been such a large part of my life that I decided it needed its own section. Trying to cram it in

with each year of my college career would grossly understate its importance in my life. The fact that UT had a club team was a major selling point when I was trying to decide where I wanted to go to college. I invested a lot of time and money in the sport, and it was worth every penny.

We practiced at least three times a week. Add to that two or three games each weekend, and it's easy to see that my time was very limited during lacrosse season. This taught me very important time management skills. In the world of journalism, and the business world in general, I will always be working under a deadline. This was just another way for me to learn how to budget my time – a skill that carries over into the “real world.”

My freshman year, I was able to get a lot of playing time. In the past, this usually did not happen at UT. Most people don't see substantial playing time until their sophomore season. But the team was in need of defensemen that year, and I was ready to step into the starting lineup.

That year we played in the longest game in league history. We lost at home to Florida in quadruple-overtime. While it was only the third college game I played in, I gained a lot of confidence because my coach kept me in for the last few seconds of the game. I realized he believed in my skill, and that I belonged on the field, even though I was only a freshman.

We got our revenge at the SELC tournament, held in Chattanooga. We drew Florida in the first round. Although we were the underdogs, we beat the Gators by several goals. It was the most enjoyable victory of my UT career. We ended up taking third place in the tournament, beating Vanderbilt in the consolation game.

My sophomore season, I was selected to be the team's treasurer. I was in charge of all things financial, from collecting dues to having Rec Sports cut checks to pay for our many travel expenses.

This season ended in disappointment. We did not make the conference tournament, even though I think we had a team good enough to run with the big dogs. We lost our concentration and commitment after spring break, and our season fell apart. But, when we traveled to Florida State, we beat the Seminoles in overtime – a huge victory for us.

I was elected a captain my junior year, and anchored a very strong defensive unit. While our offense had trouble producing, the defense kept the other team off the scoreboard, and gave the team life when they probably had no business competing with some teams. We had come from behind wins against Georgia Tech and Florida State, and returned to the SELC tournament, only to be put out in the opening round by the eventual champions, Georgia Tech. After the tournament, I learned that I was selected to the SELC All-Conference Team.

My senior season started off on a sour note. We knew our season was not going to lead to the conference tournament when we lost three qualifying games by a combined four goals. But the team persevered and was able to end the season on a five-game winning streak. My college lacrosse career was capped off when I was again named to the All-Conference team.

SUMMING IT UP

Over the last four years, I have changed a lot and matured greatly. I met many interesting people and found the love of my life. I don't think anyone can have as much

fun as I did while I was here in Knoxville. It's hard to imagine that my days here as a student will be over in just a few days.

I do believe am ready to move on. It was tough to move away from my family when I came to college. But I was ready to get out of the "Brentwood Bubble" and experience more of what this world has to offer. My college career has given me the tools I need to be a valuable member of society. I received a quality education in the classroom, and the lessons I learned after class have turned me from a timid ignorant 18-year-old into a socially- and emotionally-stable man.

I hate to see these days go. But I must move on. I will cherish forever my experiences at UT, and the friendships I have formed. This is where I met the best people in the world. I think my friend Austin Webb said it best on a website full of photographs archiving the fun we've had in college: "Every time I look at this website, I realize how lucky I was to have had the best college experience ever with cool people like this. I have done everything I could have hoped for and more."

Thank you to everyone who made my college experience it is.

Chris Kirk

The UT Experience

By Chris Kirk

The People

Anna Bergman





Laurence "Larry" Tilley



Austin Webb



Matt Finney



Jamie Frick



Cpl. Neal "Fish" Fischer



Brad Casacci



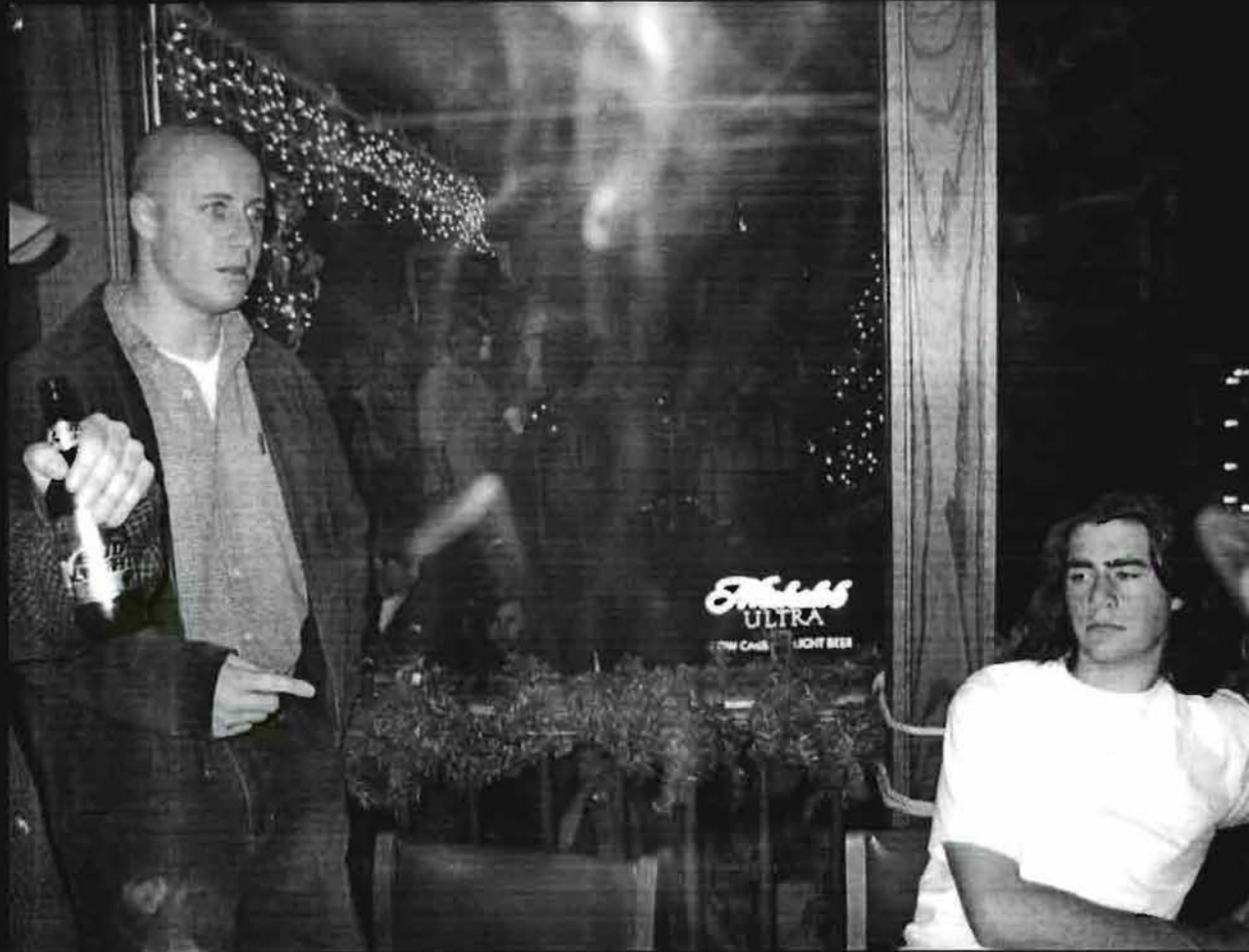
Shawn "Nazz" Cachran



James "Cliff" Clifford



Chris Bicsak (left) and Larry Tilley, enjoying the smoky "atmosphere" at one of Knoxville's many bars



The Destinations

Brad and Anna on Ft. Lauderdale Beach, site of Spring Break 2004 and 2005



Tims Ford Lake



Finney's boat on Tims Ford Lake
Photo by Austin Webb



The dock at Finney's lake house
Tims Ford Lake









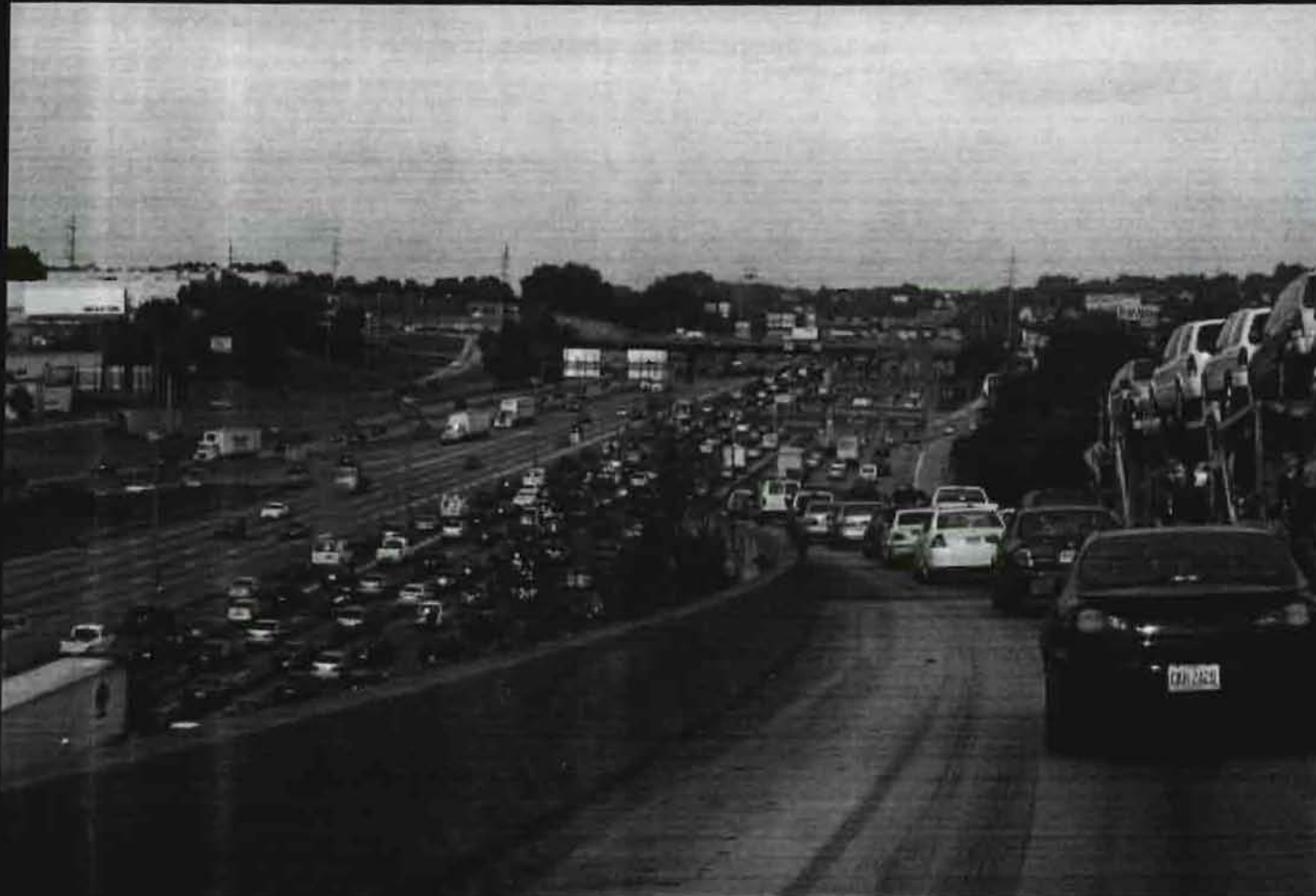
Austin's pop-up camper, our home for each of UT's away football games



Frank, one of the Tennessee Travelers, with his behemoth of a grill



Traffic in Atlanta, the major obstacle between us and Athens, site of the UT/UGA football game.



Does it get any prettier?
The Power T for Tennessee between "The Hedges"
Athens, Ga.



Cocky-doodle-Lou, one of our acquaintances from the UT/South Carolina football game in Columbia, S.C.



Around Campus



















North Carrick Residence Hall



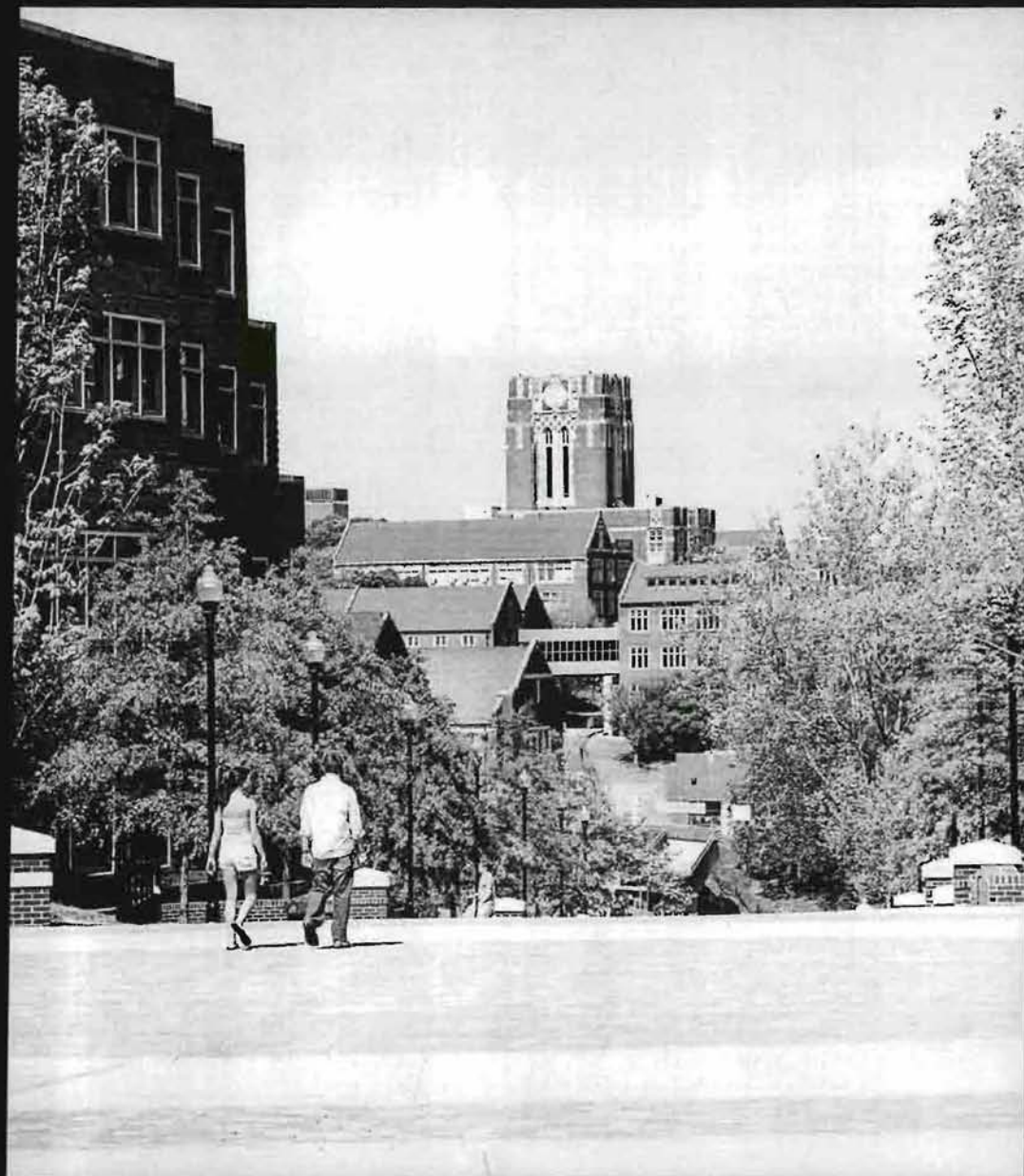
The Intramural Fields and the T-RECS



The Intramural Fields, backed by rolling Tennessee hills







The University Center





Inside the University Center







It's Football Time In Tennessee!



The “Lacrosse House”

13th and White













