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Has anyone ever lived in the Alumni House?

Katrina Counter

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August 2022

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings,

Has anyone ever lived in the Alumni House?

Katrina Counter '23

Answer:

My dearest Katrina,

An excellent question! Our warm and welcoming Alumni House – The Rev. Ignatius Francis Van Dyke, O.Praem. Alumni House, to be precise, named for my very first student here at St. Norbert College – has served several distinguished purposes throughout its 106-year history. I'm pleased to confirm that many people indeed called it home in its previous iterations.

The building that came to be our Alumni House was constructed in 1916 as the rectory for the adjacent St. John's Lutheran Church, and remained in that capacity throughout my tenure as president. In 1961, under the leadership of my successor, Father Dennis Burke (himself



Ask the Abbot

As the founder of St. Norbert College, and having a prime seat in the center of campus throughout the years, I, Abbot Bernard Pennings, hold the answers to many of your burning questions about the college.

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an esteemed member of our Class of 1926), the college expanded its campus across Third Street by acquiring both the church and the rectory for \$23,000 – quite a bargain by today’s standards! As part of the deal, the church’s pastor remained in the home until 1965. College faculty resided there for the following three years. The church, meanwhile, was renovated to house various departments on campus under the name of St. John’s Hall. In 2013, it was transformed into our wonderful Cassandra Voss Center. Elements of the original church – most notably, the bell tower – were purposefully incorporated into the latter renovation. It brings me such joy when sacred spaces are retained and reimaged!

In 1968, the house attained its first measure of prominence on campus when it was designated the Chancellor’s Residence. Our dear Father Burke, then transitioning out of the presidency, lived there until 1977 while serving under Presidents Christin and Webb. Today, visitors to the house may take notice of Father Burke’s desk in the parlor, a symbol of his enduring legacy at the college.

Following its stint as the Chancellor’s Residence, the house opened its doors to St. Norbert students for the first time in 1978 as the International Culture House. Students who specialized in foreign language and foreign culture made this house their home over the next two decades. Until 1985, students enrolled in the IBLAS program – International Business & Language Area Studies – also had the option to live there. By 1998, the year of the college’s centennial, an alumni-funded campaign was well underway to renovate the house from residential quarters into a gathering place for alumni and the college community. The generosity of our donors inspires me still today!

On June 12, 1999, the Rev. Ignatius Francis Van Dyke, O.Praem. Alumni House was dedicated in a ceremony that included two of my dear confrères: Abbot Thomas De Wane (one of our 1955 graduates), who delivered the invocation, and Father Rowland De Peaux (Class of 1948), who gave the benediction. This was especially fitting, since Father De Peaux had taught many of the students who lived in the International Culture House. The college’s oldest living alum at the time, Andrew Janssen ’21 – that’s 1921, mind you – was on hand to

cut the ribbon, along with alumni director Dianne Wagner '65 and her predecessor, Karen McDiarmid '75, both of whom were instrumental in envisioning and modifying the space.

Though this marked the end of the house's service as a college residence, the Alumni House continues to bring St. Norbert community members together, whether to celebrate joyous occasions, reunite with old friends, or simply reminisce in a setting rich with history.

Responses to "Ask the Abbot" questions are penned by St. Norbert College staff in the name of Abbot Bernard Pennings, who founded St. Norbert College in 1898.

St. Norbert College

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