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Feature: More Than a Dorm

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More than a dorm

— by Toni Shears

“When the University graduates law students unsurpassed anywhere in character and scholarship, the effect on the bar and the country will be very great ... The Lawyers Club building now finished is of no consequence except to forward that purpose.”

— Donor William W. Cook, in a letter read at the dedication of the Lawyers Club, June 1925.

The gentlemanly coats and ties once worn to the dining hall have been replaced by sweatshirts and baseball caps. The ping pong table in the basement has given way to video games. The quadrangle lawns once so carefully manicured that students didn’t dare tread on them now invite Frisbee™ and football tossing.

The Lawyers Club at the University of Michigan Law School has seen many changes since it opened seventy years ago, but its beauty and its raison d’etre remain essentially unchanged. William W. Cook intended the first of the four Law School buildings he donated to be not merely a dormitory, but a beautiful, inspiring intellectual home for serious
One of the most obvious changes former graduates find when they return to the club is that, often as not, women are occupying their rooms. “Indeed, the presence of women in the wrong hours once was grounds for University discipline.”

— Professor Emeritus John Reed
reflection upon the law. It still fulfills that function for students today.

"I remember when we were discussing affirmative action in class, we talked and talked about the issues after class, at lunch, and at dinner. I learned at least as much in the dining hall as in the classroom," says Moushumi Khan, a 2L who lived in the club her first year.

"The thing I really liked about the experience was that the students living there were so diverse. Some were older and had done a lot of things. I felt like I could talk with them and explore different views."

"It's a good first-year experience. You are in such close proximity that you automatically get to know people in your class," Khan adds. For her second year of school, she moved out of the club but not far away. From her apartment directly across the street from the Law Quadrangle, she can easily eat meals in the dining hall and take aerobics in the lounge.

The aerobics classes are one sign of how the Lawyers Club has remained at the center of Law School life by evolving with the times. The gracious and lovely building accommodates all types of student needs and activities, says Diane Nafranowicz, director of the club for fifteen years.

"We have exercise classes, karate classes, study groups, seminars, journal groups, and Head Notes practices meeting here. Our services and spaces are open to students regardless of whether they live here," she says. The club even provides free beverages to brown-bagging nonresident students who want to stop in and have lunch with their friends. Faculty lunches, formal dinners, memorial services, and even weddings are held there.

The club is unique among law school dormitories both for its beauty and its convenience. Students love it for both features: after a late night of studying, they can roll out of bed and be in class in minutes. Reagan Robbins, a 1L from Illinois, says she valued that advantage and the convenience of not having to hunt for an apartment. Laurel Queeno,
“Lunch and dinner were served by waiters, and we wore coats and ties for dinner. No one dared walk on the grass; the Japanese gardener had the grass looking like a golf course fairway.”

— Professor Theodore J. St. Antoine
a 3L from Buffalo, observes, “It’s always been important to me that my physical surroundings not annoy me. The Gothic architecture really does give you more of a sense of peace.”

For many residents, not having to cook their own meals is a valuable timesaver. Sheri Hurbanis, a 3L who has lived in the club all three years, appreciated that in her first year. “Before you’ve learned how to study and how to do what you need to do, everything takes so much time,” she observes. Looking back on those days on her very last day of Law School, she adds with a laugh, “I wish I had as much time as I did then.”

By design, the Lawyers Club fosters a supportive sense of community that makes it “more than an apartment complex in a great location with a pretty facade,” Nafranowicz says. “In the dining room, people are talking about issues of adjustment to Law School. In the laundry room, people are talking about legal issues. At the mailboxes, you’ll hear talk about how it feels to get a ding (rejection) letter, and in the lobby you’ll witness the abject joy when a job offer comes through. It’s a like living in a small town. To some people, that feels supportive and warm and comforting.”

Said 1L Patrick Curley, “One of the reasons I came to Michigan was the sense of community that revolves around the Lawyer’s Club. I went to a small private college where that feeling meant a lot to me.” Although he and the friends he made weren’t inclined to talk about law all the time, he found it was easy to meet classmates and study with them. Khan found her classmates’ presence reassuring: “There is always someone around going through what you are going through. If it’s 2 a.m. the night before an exam and you suddenly panic because you’re not sure you understand something, there’s always someone around to ask.” Most students said that advantage outweighs the drawbacks of being under stress and in close quarters during exams.

In addition, the staff is specially trained to support students facing the stresses of law school. Nafranowicz, who has a master’s degree in social work and years of experience in academic environments, offers student counseling and problem-resolution. “In the first year, students can face a lot of adjustment issues. They are in a new environment, dealing with time management and a new way of thinking, reading, teaching, and learning. These pressures are exacerbated by the cost of school and the pressure to do well and find a job,” she says. “In addition to the rigors of academic life, they may be facing any of the whole range of personal life issues involving relationships, alcohol use, eating disorders, depression, family difficulties, and so on.” Friendly, warm, and understanding, Nafranowicz is a welcoming person to turn to for help with such issues.

Hurbans and Khan both express gratitude for Nafranowicz and her staff. As the night manager responsible for locking the clubs doors and handling emergency calls after hours in her second and third years, Hurbans worked closely with the staff and came to respect each and every employee. Alert to the pressures students face in a new academic environment, the staff tries to help ease the transition. “They are really aware of student issues and try to help; it’s not like this is just a motel,” Khan says. “They try to create a sense of family, a sense of belonging here. They ask for recipes from your family and will cook them.”

Women and computers

One of the most obvious changes former graduates find when they return to the club is that, often as not, women are occupying their rooms. “Indeed, the presence of women in the wrong hours once was grounds for University discipline,” recalls Professor Emeritus John Reed, who was in charge of the club from 1950-63.

Women weren’t part of William Cook’s plan in 1922 when he offered to build the club as a cornerstone of a quadrangle of law buildings. It’s clear from his proposals that he intended the club to house 151 gentlemen “of a superior class,” in quarters modeled on the English Inns of Court. The original blueprints reflect Cook’s class views. They show no laundry rooms, but there was a tailor in the basement, to whom men could take their shirts to have their collars turned. Likewise, there were no kitchenettes to prepare a quick snack; these men were accustomed to having others cook for them. Until some time in the 1950s, there was maid service.

Suites were designed for gracious living, with attractive bedrooms and sitting rooms with fireplaces where students could entertain others and discuss the legal problems under study. More than ninety percent of the suites offer a private bedroom and fifty still have working fireplaces.

Cook also intended that the club would attract judges, attorneys, and scholars, so that students could mingle freely with the finest legal minds. To that end, the club includes the grand dining hall which seats 300, a huge and elegant lounge, and guest quarters which are still in demand, particularly by families and graduates on reunion and graduation weekends, Nafranowicz says.

Every year about half of the first-year class elects to live in the club. A fair share stay on for all three years. Occupancy, once at a high of 316, is now at 269. “Every year, we’re full,” Nafranowicz says.

Despite heavy use, the building has been amazingly durable: its first major renovation was in 1965, forty years after it opened. While the walls were meant to last a thousand years, the plumbing and heating weren’t. The utilities have been upgraded again more recently, to keep up with the power demands of students who arrive equipped with a stereo, a computer, a microwave, an answering machine, a refrigerator, and more.

Another unique feature of the club is that it is financially self-supporting. Nafranowicz notes with pride that the facility’s $1.8 million budget comes entirely from resident fees. (Rent, meals,
utilities, and basic phone service cost $5,900 in 1994-95.)

Cook also stipulated that a Board of Governors would oversee the club. Although the University's Housing Division took over the day-to-day operations in the late 1960s, the Board of Governors still exercises its oversight. Consisting of faculty, graduates, associate deans, and student representatives, the board preserves the building as a living heirloom. Khan, the student representative to the board, says that decisions like selecting new furnishings involve balancing the interests of nostalgic graduates who wish to maintain the club's traditional beauty, and those of current students who want to put the space to practical use.

"The concern of alumni who had fond recollections of living in the Lawyers Club have been very much a factor in maintaining the building," says Professor Theodore J. St. Antoine. "The momentum behind the very first capital campaign in the law school's history, which led to the construction of the library addition, was an outgrowth of alumni determination to mount a campaign to refurbish the club."

Myths and memories

Students come to the Lawyers Club for its convenience. What they remember thirty years afterward is the lively discussions, the friendships, the high jinks, and the camaraderie that marked daily life in the club and enriched their law school experience. Graduates who return for reunions frequently share those memories with Nafranowicz. "It's a real joy to hear them recounting how significant their time here has been," she says. They remember dramatic moments: gathering around a radio to hear reports of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or at the television to hear Lyndon Johnson announce that he would not seek reelection.

Today, students like Mou Khan are making the same indelible impressions: "One of my first memories of Law School is of running out of Civil Procedure to get to a television to see the signing of the Palestinian-Israeli peace treaty on the White House lawn. It was an incredible moment. Then I looked around and I noticed that the guys watching were crying. I didn't know any of them, but I felt really close to them. I felt like we had been through something important together."

Others remember the rituals and institutions of life in the Lawyer's Club. Among those memorable institutions is the late Inez Bozarth, a formidable director of the club from 1924-54 whose portrait now hangs in the lounge. A strict enforcer of gentlemanly conduct, Bozarth would stand in the dining hall entrance as students entered to make sure they were properly suited and clean-shaven. Nafranowicz has heard tales of students who competed to see how many days they could pass her inspection by shaving only the half of their faces she would see when they filed by.

St. Antoine, a 1954 graduate, remembers those more formal days: "Lunch and dinner were served by waiters, and we wore coats and ties for dinner. No one dared walk on the grass; the Japanese gardener had the grass looking like a golf course fairway."

Naturally, he says, the serious, scholarly life had its silly side as well: "I remember some poor guy returned from a weekend at home to discover his room had been so filled with scrap paper that he couldn't open the door. Also, Michigan lays claim to staging the first American university panty raid, which was perpetrated on the Martha Cook dormitory across the street and witnessed from the Lawyers Club."

Columbia University disputes Michigan's claim to that dubious honor, and St. Antoine says he can't prove who pulled the prank first or whether law students were actually involved. However, he can remember Bozarth, "small but sturdy and extraordinarily dictato-
THE LAWYERS CLUB
Facts and myths

PROPOSED BY MR. COOK ....... 1922
COMPLETED ......................... 1925
COST ........................ $1.44 MILLION
ORIGINAL OCCUPANCY .......... 151
OCCUPANCY TODAY .............. 269
ORIGINAL FEES (avg.) .......... $350
ROOM & BOARD TODAY ...... $5,900

MYTH: Cook believed that fees would generate sufficient income to endow research. That turned out to be false and never occurred. Another great myth held that Cook specified that ice cream would be served at every meal. Although ice cream is, in fact, almost always available, Cook made no such requirement.