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FIRST YEAR REFLECTIONS

House Director Journal... "Freshman Year" Review

It's been a strange year and I really feel sorry for the Seniors and the Freshmen who missed a lot of the opportunities that make college a special experience. But overall, I have to give the guys credit for adjusting to a most unusual set of circumstances. Still it wasn't what anyone wanted it to be... as I said last time, I even missed some of the mess... some!

But State and University policies put the Alumni Council that owns the House in a bind. Traditionally, graduation weekend is a blowout, complete with an event the guys call a "Broast"... a roast of the Seniors as a way to both honor and make fun of them. The Alumni got word from our International and insurance provider that if we had any House sponsored events and we had an incident while violating the social distancing orders, we would have no insurance and the officers (undergrad and Alum) and I would be personally liable. This is on top of any University sanctions for having a sponsored gathering.

This put us in a tough spot. The Undergrads have an officer called a "Risk Manager"... and this is a clear-cut case of risk management. I argued that we spent all year trying to get them to "own" the House, trying to get them to take care of it better. So, for me, to chase them out at the end of the year seemed hypocritical. I lost! Eventually I agreed that we would have a police officer on site during Friday and Saturday evenings to assure that we followed the rules. The deciding factor for me was that this weekend has traditionally been a time where the Seniors (and others) trashed the House as a "farewell present." I didn't want to see the progress we have made trampled in one weekend.

Officer Ryan showed up at 9 Friday and Saturday nights and immediately engaged with the guys who were here. Shortly thereafter they dispersed and he... and the House... had very quiet and uneventful evenings. The weekend turned out to be a fun reunion, the improvised Broast was a great farewell for the seniors, and a successful end to a difficult and strange year for the House. We were even able to get the New Members who came back to help me complete the scraping of the tile in the basement in preparation for a new floor. And once we fill the annual "house cleaning" dumpster and check everyone out of their rooms, I'll be ready for a couple months of quiet puttering... and some travel!

I figured it was a good time to reflect on my "Freshman Year as House Director"... here, in no particular order, are some of the things I learned... and in some cases, re-learned:

A well-placed request is a lot more effective than a hard-pressed demand.

One of the things I've tried to emphasize is "enlightened self-interest"... do what's good for you (like take the garbage out, etc.). Unfortunately, in some cases, the response is closer to careless and selfish... and the word for that is immaturity. They are "kids" after all.

I try very hard not to start conversations with phrases like, "In my day", or "When I was here"... but some of the stories make it through and seem to have some impact. And they got great chuckles from seeing my freshman year ID card and the composite from the year I was President. In the final analysis it is the stories that build the Brotherhood and we did that this year.

“What you do speaks so loudly I cannot hear a word you say.” That quote that has been attributed to several people, but I first encountered it on a graffiti wall at Ohio University while attending at a Journalism program during high school. Never more true than now, when the guys who do the most backslapping are very likely not the ones who show up for cleaning sessions.

Corollary: When it’s everybody’s job, nobody gets it done... and I freely admit I have been the “nobody” a lot more than I wanted to be this year.

Corollary # 2: As soon as someone takes responsibility for something, everyone else thinks they are off the hook. This shows up in blaming the House Manager for not cleaning when it’s actually his job to organize others for cleaning, not just do it himself. Another example is when we signed up new members (aka pledges) and everyone in house immediately thought they should do all the housekeeping... they call it “tradition”... I call it BS. A target for improvement next year.

One of my Mom’s favorite phrases was “Waste not, want not.” This was clearly the result of St. Ruth being raised during the depression. It led to Mom reminding 7 kids of Captain Penney’s Clean Plate Club and not wasting food that could feed those starving kids in China... I would have gladly sent them some of the liver and onions that were a regular staple of our dinner table. But that message would be lost on the current generation... they have not known “want”. For the most part they have been privileged and, in some cases, spoiled. Interested to see how their “world view” will develop.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them think... the drinking is already taken care of.

Don’t get me wrong... it’s been an interesting and fun year, full of challenges as well as frustrations, but worthwhile. The best times have been when they have volunteered for improving the house or I’ve had time to talk individually about sports or school or life. Additionally, I’ve been able to help with resumes, interview prep, and presentations... even got interviewed for a project... and he got 100%!

Another example: I had occasion to speak to a graduating senior about a video his roommate shared with me... let’s just say it was not flattering. He’s a good young man who has earned a spot with a prestigious firm on the path to becoming a CPA. I had to explain to him that if that video makes it way to social media, it could damage his career and his roommate was way too eager to share it. I hope he got the message and gets all copies erased... but it felt good to help get him ready for the “real world”

My favorite phrase among the Undergraduates... “That’s fair!” It doesn’t matter where they came from or what the subject is, the phrase comes up. Of course, I fully understand that in some cases they really mean they disagree... inflection counts! But more often than not, it’s the way they resolve an issue, accept a decision or show agreement. And I’m always glad when they demonstrate how they process information... engaged brains are a wonderful thing!

I have to admit it’s been gratifying to have so many of the Brothers and parents approach me with words of encouragement about the progress the House has made this year. While I always mention that it was a team effort. It means a lot when someone simply says, “Thanks!”

And here’s the best news.... There will be a Sophomore year! That’s fair! See you in August!