

The Spirit of Hinman

There is nothing more sad or glorious than generations changing hands.

-John Mellencamp

It's hard to explain to someone who has never lived in Hinman College exactly what it is that's special about Hinman. When you mention it to them, usually they'll give you a weird look, their brow will become constricted deep in contemplation and their countenance will betray their severe inability to comprehend what you're talking about. At most they'll mutter the words, "What is so special about a dorm?"

I've had this experience myself. During the Clue Run event of Dorm Wars 2006 I was stationed as a judge along with a number of freshmen Hinmanites at the CIW Dining Hall. At the time, these young Hinmanites, new not only to Hinman but the entire college experience, took it upon themselves to ask me, a senior and four-year Hinman resident, the important question: "What's so great about Hinman?" I tried as best I could to explain to them the glories of Hinman's past and the potential of its future and all of the great opportunities that it had presented to me. I told them about our traditions, the opportunities for involvement, and the most special part of Hinman (to me at least) which was all the wonderful people I had met and the lifelong friends I had made along the way. To this many of them laughed suggesting that to them Hinman would be nothing but a bunch of bricks and mortar, a place that they would sleep while they spent four years studying to get their degree. In fact nearly all of them thought I was completely foolish to invest so much of myself in a single residential college when I could be off doing what they were doing, chiefly partying, experimenting with legal and illegal substances, and generally just being any other ordinary college student.

I came away from this experience somewhat perturbed, feeling lost and isolated. Was I really the only one who cared about Hinman? Then I reminded myself that one of two things

would happen to these young Hinmanites. They would continue to feel the same way they do now and eventually move to either another residential community or off campus. Some people, no matter how hard you may try to enlighten them, never attain the Hinman Spirit. You shouldn't feel anger or resentment towards these unfortunate people. Instead you should feel sympathy for them for not experiencing this awesome and immensely gratifying feeling. The second possible event that could occur (and the one I hope for them and all other current and future Hinmanites) is that they'll stay in the community and that they'll learn and grow and, more importantly, stay involved. If this happens, there is a good chance that they'll grow to love the community and appreciate the Spirit of Hinman.

“But you still haven't answered the initial question” you may say, “what is the Spirit of Hinman?” The Spirit of Hinman is something that is not easily quantified or explained. I'll admit it is a vague and abstract and intangible concept. Perhaps the best way to explain it is with another story. In the Spring of 2006, near the end of my junior year of college, inside the Hinman Commons the annual Hinman Pre-service meeting took place. For those of you who don't know, the Hinman Pre-service is a time when all the returning RA's and DA's and the newly hired RA's and DA's get together for the first time and are allowed to mingle and meet one another. Also, team building exercises and some ground rules about the conduct of RA's and DA's are laid out for all to know. From here the following year's RA/DA staffs are chosen by Hinman's Assistant Director, Resident Directors, and Faculty Master. It was during this time that at the end of Pre-Service in a sort of kooky but ultimately fulfilling ritual, the lights of the Commons were dimmed and a candle was lit. This candle represented the Hinman Spirit. Everyone was to get into a large circle and the newcomers to Hinman were to read a quote from a cardboard placard that was handed out to them. The returners to Hinman were to share their

favorite Hinman memory. As the candle moved around the circle, slowly but surely making its way in my direction, I wracked my brain for what I was going to say. I mean, how do you boil down three years of what can only be described as pure joy into a single memory? I had more wonderful memories than I could possibly relate to my peers in this group. When the candle finally got to me I held it in my hand for a moment, admiring its beauty and all the happiness, hard work, and tradition of not only my minuscule three years, but of the people who lived through the previous forty years of Hinman history. I looked at the people around me, many of whom I had know since I entered Hinman three years previous as a scared, naïve freshman from a small town in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York. All eyes were upon me. Even at this stage I had acquired something of a reputation for eloquence in my speeches. I tend to disagree, but I will admit that I do have my moments from time to time. I looked back at the candle, opened my mouth, perhaps a few words escaped me, the emotion boiling up from deep inside my soul. It was going to be a cathartic and nearly liberating experience, and then with the breath from my body overcoming my senses and my perceptions, I blew out the candle, extinguishing its flame and plunging the entire room into darkness. At first a hushed silence fell across the room for probably about a second or less, but to me it was an eternity. Then the room erupted into laughter at my gaff and a bit a relief fell over me. *Whew, I thought, no one is going to lynch me for blowing out the Hinman Spirit.*

Those who don't know Hinman will never understand, but my act of blowing out the candle that represented the Hinman Spirit is akin to dropping the Olympic torch. It's sacrilege to do so. Luckily for me one of the RD's, Malindra Ratnayake, dutifully took out his lighter and relit the candle which allowed the ceremony to continue without incident. I vaguely remember

mumbling something about friendship and passed it off to the guy next to me, Ryan Schoeffield, a fellow RA who I had known for years and who was barely containing his laughter.

“Ok, great story,” you say, “but I still don’t understand what the Hinman Spirit is all about.” I will respond by saying that the Spirit of Hinman’s very essence is contained within this story. By inadvertently blowing out that candle I had committed the most gross and heinous crime imaginably by Hinman standards. It was an act of high treason. I was Judas, Brutus, and Benedict Arnold all rolled up into one. My act was the Hinman equivalent of assassination. Blowing out the candle made me a John Wilkes Booth or a Lee Harvey Oswald or a James Earl Ray. I should have been Hinman’s public enemy number one, tarred and feathered and banished from the community for my unspeakable crimes. But instead of being ostracized or lynched by a mob of angry Hinmanites, I was spared. In fact, I was laughed at. No, I take that back. I wasn’t laughed at. I was laughed with. Almost instantaneously after my despicable deed I was forgiven and absolved of all my sins. My peers looked at me and laughed. They figuratively took me back into their arms and kept me as one of their own. I even ate dinner at the Hinman Dining Hall with some of them later that evening.

You see, that is what Hinman is all about. It’s about laughter. It’s about friendship. It’s about forgiveness, and so much more. A person could easily fill an entire chapter on virtues associated with Hinman and the people who have lived and currently live within its bounds. But the message you as a reader, whether you’ve lived four years or more of your college experience in Hinman or have never even heard of the place, is that it is something special, that it is something unique.

Over the summer, Professor Al Vos, the Faculty Master of Hinman approached me about writing a history of Hinman College as a sort of addition to Hinman’s Fortieth Anniversary that

would be held in the Fall of 2007. When classes reconvened in August of 2006, I agreed that I would undertake this awesome task to write this history, partly because I thought it might be fun, but also because I still felt guilty about blowing out the Hinman Spirit. You see, during Dorm Wars, when those freshmen couldn't even begin to comprehend what the Spirit of Hinman could be all about, I felt that my symbolic act of blowing out that candle destroyed that spirit jeopardizing all future generations of Hinmanites to apathy and making Hinman just another dormitory community among many at Binghamton University and just another in a long list of dorm communities at colleges and universities across the country and around the world. I entered into this project hoping to make amends, and feeling the tendrils of student disinterest and apathy already beginning to swallow the residential college that I love so very much, I hoped that my writing could capture, even if just for a moment, a splinter of that glory and splendor of Hinman's past, and maybe, just maybe inspire a young burgeoning Hinmanite to follow in the footsteps of Hinman's founding fathers and mothers and set this community apart from all the others. That is my goal and my hope for the future.

I don't know if the words that you'll read within this book will accomplish that, but I hope that perhaps from reading stories, like the ones I have described to you and the ones that you'll read in the following pages, you'll gain a greater understanding of what the Hinman experience has been and by extension of that begin to comprehend the Spirit of Hinman.

Now that you've read this long preamble to an even greater epic that would make Homer (the ancient Greek poet, not the character from *The Simpsons*) wince with effort I can now vainly try to offer a definition of the Spirit of Hinman. The Spirit of Hinman is something that is held within each and every one of us. Only by being a part of Hinman can you begin to fathom the Spirit of Hinman. Like I said earlier, some never get the Hinman Spirit no matter how hard you

may try to offer it to them. Others, like myself, come to it easily, like a catching a benign influenza that spreads rapidly infecting everyone with its greatness and majesty. It's something that makes no sound, yet you can hear it every time you sit in one of the lounges in any of the residence halls in Hinman and listen to the laughter of the residents living within their walls or whenever any Billy Joel song comes on the radio, especially *Piano Man*. It's not visible, but you can see it every time a Co-Rec game is played or you watch an HPC production or go to a Dorm Wars or Hysteria event. It has no odor but you can smell it during those crisp spring days when the buds emerge and the fresh southern tier breezes blow the perfumes of blossoming flowers and a rejuvenated land across the quad. It has no discernible feel, but you can touch it each and every time you shake the hand of the welcoming staff member you met when you first set foot in Hinman or embrace the roommate or person who you haven't seen in years yet became your best friend all because you shared a similar residential community. It has no known flavor, but you can taste it in the offerings of the Hinman Dining Hall, such as one of its jelly donuts. Come to think of it, maybe Homer Simpson would appreciate the Hinman Spirit.

The Spirit of Hinman is all these things and more. It is like a sixth sense that you can't explain or prove that it exists but yet you know that it is there. It's something that you have to experience, something that you have to live through to truly comprehend. It has all the power and glory of a religious epiphany, yet all the mild and down-to-earth simplicity of a simple smile from an old friend. *Civilus...Privatus...Scholasticus*. That is Hinman's motto, but its spirit can be boiled down to community, friendship, family.

These musings on my part can do it no justice. So I will leave you with these parting thoughts. Like the tide of the oceans, the Spirit of Hinman may ebb and flow with each generation and within each individual but it is always there. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, it

may be the best of times or the worst of times, but it will certainly be the time that you will always remember. We, who have lived in Hinman, can state unequivocally that we will always remember our time in Hinman and cherish our memories of Hinman for the rest of our lives.

This history, though, is not my story. Rather it is the story of individuals who lived through every epoch of Hinman history and played a part in its development. It is to these individuals, alumni to a truly unique and special residential college, that this work is dutifully dedicated. Perhaps by reading these following chapters you will come to know and appreciate these individuals, who to the greater outside world are nothing special, but to this place they are truly exceptional and extraordinary. More than a history of a physical location this is a history of people, of individuals who embody the Spirit of Hinman.