

The Cooking Dorm (Roosevelt Hall)

Along with the experiments in self-regulation and apartment-style living, another grand experiment took place inside Hinman in 1973. One of the ideas floated after the initial successes in housing policy was to establish a dorm which would be outfitted with kitchens so that residents could prepare their own meals and be free of the university meal plan. It was decided that the A-wing of Roosevelt Hall would be outfitted with the kitchens while the B-wing of the building would remain a regular dorm.

It would begin on a trial basis and from there it would be decided by university administration whether or not to continue operation. In early October of 1973 university officials Ed Demske, Mary Richardson, Stu Gordon, and Walt May were given a tour of the cooking side of Roosevelt led by Head Resident Cheryl Eller (then wife of Allan Eller) and Faculty Master Vito Sinisi. They visited approximately half the suites at random and spoke to some of the residents who inhabited the cooking dorm. Most of the administrators came into the tour bracing for the worst. SUNY Stony Brook had tried a similar experiment which had failed miserably, mostly due to the students there not cleaning up after themselves and making horrendous messes in their living areas. This was not the case in the Roosevelt Hall cooking dorm. In fact, Walt May found the rooms to be ““extremely neat and well-kept.””¹ All of the administrators were impressed with the near spotless cooking facilities that the students used, so impressed that they actually questioned whether the suites they toured were random. They were and Head Resident Cheryl Eller explained her thesis that students who opted to live in the cooking dorm were usually more mature students who understand independent living and responsibility and that they genuinely wanted to make the experiment a success. She also stated that the suites in the cooking dorm were by and large cleaner than most of the other regular suites

in Hinman. The administrators left Roosevelt feeling that the sanitation was adequate and that the experiment could continue in Roosevelt. Vito Sinisi also promised to look into acquiring larger sinks for the suite bathrooms and screens to prevent food from going down the sink drains and clogging the pipes.²

For many years the A-side of Roosevelt Hall was the cooking dorm and was a popular and coveted option especially for older students who were tired of the dining hall's institutional food. Adam Brown, who was a resident of Roosevelt Hall for many years, first as a student then later as a Resident Director, fondly remembers the cooking dorm as a very multicultural experience. The people who lived on that side of the building were a diverse lot from many different backgrounds. African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, Anglo-Americans and virtually every other ethnic group you could think of seemed to be drawn to the cooking dorm. It allowed them the opportunity to prepare their own traditional dishes, but it also allowed people who wanted to learn about preparing new and different cuisines a chance to do so. They may have come to learn about food, but they wound up learning about different cultures and each other. The cooking dorm became a microcosm of America's melting pot with all the different ethnic groups living together and cooking together like a family. For many who had come from the New York metropolitan area, it was like they had never left home. For those who did not hail from New York City and its environs, and even for those who did, it was an experience learning not just about different types of ethnic foods, but also about cultures different from one's own and gaining a greater appreciation for the differences of your suitemates and floormates. Just about everyone who had a chance to live in the cooking dorm loved it and each one can attest that they shared more than just food.³ Allan Eller even got in on

the action, holding informal classes teaching the residents of the cooking dorm how to prepare simple dishes.⁴

Unfortunately, this was not to last. During the 1983-1984 academic year the cooking dorm was closed and the kitchens were removed.⁵ One of reason that the cooking dorm was not expanded to the rest of Roosevelt Hall or the rest of Hinman for that matter was that there still was concern on the part of administrators that sanitation would be an issue. In later years sanitation did become more of an issue with some residents not cleaning up after themselves and leaving a mess in the kitchens which would attract pests. The cooking dorm also became a fire hazard. Since the day the kitchenettes were installed there had been problems with the electrical system. The sad truth was that Roosevelt Hall was simply not designed to handle the electrical demands and heat outputs of the kitchenettes. Sometimes a resident would mistakenly leave a pot or pan unattended for long periods of time, long enough to set off the smoke detectors.⁶ This caused concern that a fire could start from inattentive residents in the cooking dorm.* Perhaps the main reason that the cooking dorm was discontinued was the fact that the students who lived there could opt out of the university meal plan. It reduced income for the company that prepared meals for the campus dining services. It is safe to assume that ACE, which was the company that prepared meals for campus dining services at the time, played a significant role in bringing about the downfall of the cooking dorm.

The cooking dorm was the last in a long line of progressive measures on the part of Hinman College to experiment in alternative styles of housing for its residents. Like the pet policy before it, the cooking dorm may not have lasted long (in comparison to self-regulation and apartment-style living which still occur today) but it did have a lasting impact on all of the

* This fact proved true in the Fall of 2006 when Cleveland Hall suffered a small fire in its kitchen area due to someone leaving a boiling pot unattended for a long period of time. Luckily, due largely to the quick and heroic actions of RA Jimmy Galante, the fire was contained, minimal structure damage was incurred, and no one got hurt.

residents who lived within Roosevelt Hall at the time, whether they lived on the A-side or not. Self-regulation and apartment-style living brought together the two genders and allowed them to not only interact with one another on a casual basis, but also allowed them to learn from each other. The cooking dorm did the same thing, except it broke through the barriers of race, religion and custom and created a truly unique culture: the Hinman culture. While different ethnic groups certainly mixed in other buildings in Hinman, nowhere else was it more evident than in the cooking dorm. They not only lived and studied together, but they cooked together and shared their various cuisines with their neighbors, largely people who they would never have come into contact with if they had not lived in the Hinman's cooking dorm. This simple act of sitting down and breaking bread together bound these residents together like nothing else could. Long before the rest of the country truly broke through the barriers of racism and ethnic stereotypes, Hinman was doing just that since the early 1970's with much success. For this reason alone, the cooking dorm was truly a testament to Hinman's pioneering spirit.

¹ "Administrators Impressed with Cooking Dorm," *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. IV, No. 5, October 11, 1973.

² Ibid.

³ Adam Brown, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2006.

⁴ Allan Eller, "Hinman in the 1970's," April 23, 2003.

⁵ Brown, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2006.

⁶ John Kowalczyk, "Hinman in the 1970's," April 23, 2003.