

“Writing Home”
James Bollinger

I spend A LOT of time in this dining hall. Sitting here late at night writing papers, accompanied only by the dozens of mice who come out from behind the vending machines and piano, I often get caught in thinking about this room and about Lowell in general. This often starts with questions about the physical structure - Was there always a Lowerator? Did it ever work well? Why do we have a basement with 3 laundry rooms, but 8 squash courts? But more than just a few odd design choices, I often wonder, what purposes are the Houses really supposed to serve?

This year, I found a way to get academic credit for my questions. I've been writing a thesis about the House system, searching through documents in the archives. I've read a great deal of interesting material: letters from President Lowell pleading with final club members of the 1920's to leave their clubhouses behind in favor of dining halls like this one; records of bitterly fought intramural rivalries such as the 1931 Lowell-Dunster boat race, which ended in a Lowell victory and a conciliatory session of drinking and smoking cigars; and Crimson articles about every aspect of the early Houses, including a description of our dear High Table tradition, in 1930, as “one of the most forced and misplaced institutions ever established at Harvard.”

In a perfect world, six weeks from now, with all the mysteries of the House system revealed, its goals discovered and its evolution charted, I'll turn in my thesis to the Social Studies department. Regrettably, yet predictably, this is not what I'm going to achieve (sorry, Anya). But even if I perfectly discovered the aims of administrators, and understood what the Houses were *meant* for, that would still not be the whole story. No matter what the Houses are *intended* to do, the real beauty of Lowell is that there is no fixed curriculum, no prescribed schedule, no mandatory attendance at House events. Our experiences, and the values we take from the House, are all voluntary. It's all up to us.

To explain *my* experience in Lowell, and what I think the Houses are really for, I must rewind to a few months before I entered the House. It was the middle of my freshmen spring, and I felt like I was drowning. I struggled to keep up with my coursework and my peers. I disliked most of my classes so much that expos was my favorite course. Even though I had rowed throughout high school, the level of competition on Harvard's team made me feel like I wasn't doing enough. In almost everything I tried, I didn't feel that I truly belonged. And I was scared to admit any of that to anyone, because it seemed that those around me didn't share my problems.

Sitting in Cambridge Common one cold afternoon, I called my parents and everything spilled out - how awful it felt to be on campus, how inadequate I felt. I wondered if I had made the wrong choice to come to Harvard. I've always been lucky to have my parents' advice. This time, they said, “James, try to finish this semester. See what happens next year.”

Sophomore year *was* better, and it was largely because of this room. As days went by after moving into Lowell, the faces of the people here started to become friendlier and friendlier sights. They became the seniors I learned from and looked up to; my peers in Social Studies 10 tutorial, with whom I bonded about how much reading we did, or rather didn't, do before section; the climbers I met through the student-built climbing wall in our basement. And there were my fellow members of HoCo, with whom I became friends not only because we all live together, but also because we bonded over wanting to give back to a community that we each cared about – one that, with each passing month, pulled me further up from the insecurity and depression of freshmen spring.

Though we are assigned to Houses randomly, the bonds created here are shockingly strong, and are the result of a voluntary desire to be part of this community – one that is often passed down, person-to-person, from class to class. Despite all the work of the people who made the Lowerator, and the squash courts, and the chandeliers, it's never been about what they built here. Instead, it has always been the people, and what we do here, that define this community. Lowell House has been the best part of my college experience, a true home for the past three years. Thank you all for being part of it.