

Towering Memories: Livingston College Students Move In to Dorms on North Side of Campus

[Read Steven T. Walker's interview with the Rutgers Oral History Archives.]

By Steven T. Walker, LC'86



It began with a single bead of sweat.

Ice-cold and intrusive, it worked its way from the warm parts of my body, down my rib cage and seemed to loudly splash somewhere along the right side of my only clean dress shirt.

I was terrified and worried that a huge wet streak had appeared on the side of my button-down during what, at the time, was the most important interview of my life.

I'd showered and prepared for this "preceptor" interview with zeal, only to walk from a steamy bathroom down a dank hallway and back into my stuffy dorm room before beginning the march northward from the Quads to the "forbidden" end of Livingston College Campus ... the end only inhabited by Rutgers College students.

In the early 1980s, "The Rock," as we lovingly called Livingston, was the home to the Quad dormitories for our students. "Unfortunate" Rutgers College students were banished from College Avenue to The Towers. No Livingston student had ever lived in the hulking twin towers or enjoyed the view from their majestic, twin, eight-floor vantage points.

That all was about to change on one hot, spring day in 1983.

Later, sitting in the air-conditioned apartment of the head of Residence Life in the upscale Towers residence complex, I felt I may have been out of my league and my sweat stain was growing cold by the time the actual interview was set to begin.

"So, why do you want to be a preceptor?" the interviewer queried.

My first thoughts were nothing more than incoherent fragments.

"Focus!" I told myself.

Moving through what felt like an infinite period of silence, I threw caution to the wind and blurted out the true goal of my mission, without guile or

pretense.

"I want to help kids make the adjustment to living in the dorms and away from their families for the first time," I said, after sifting through the seemingly thousands of thoughts floating around in my head. "I also want to make sure that I help let Rutgers College students learn that Livingston College students are no different than they are."

The second part of the answer probably got me at least noticed. It had barely left my lips before I regretted bringing that point to fore.

The facts were: I was sitting in what had always been a residence hall off-limits to Livingston College students, despite its location on Livingston Campus. The issue of students from the university's newest campus actually being allowed to commingle with students from its oldest was new and at the heart of the entire concept.

It was the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the room.

Either it was going to bring me onto their collective pages on this issue or it was going to knock me out of contention. I figured: "Play big or go home!"

Although I was treading in complete uncharted territory here, I felt comfortable and for one of the first times in my young life, true to myself for breaching a point that probably had been approached numerous times since "The Rock" rose from the high grounds near Camp Kilmer.

I was barely 18 years old myself and was expected to help undo something that had been firmly planted in the cultural terra firma of one of the nation's oldest universities – no pressure.

The interview proceeded flawlessly, in fact.

My interviewers did not seem alarmed by my statement, and that was cool with me.

I prepared for the inevitable and remembered how I really didn't mind living in the much maligned "Quads" and actually had grown accustomed to picking my way along its tunnels.

We shook hands wrapped up the interview and I lumbered back to my dorm room to compare notes with my roommate, who ironically had interviewed for the same preceptor position earlier that day.

How was I to know days later I would become the first Livingston preceptor and lead the first group of Livingston students into what had always been uncharted territory?

After all, Livingston College itself was one Rutgers' boldest experiments.

Established as the cutting edge of higher education, Livingston opened its doors to students in 1969 and featured a diverse, multicultural student body, pass/fail grading system and a reputation as a haven for radical students and radical thought.

Such things were big for a university like Rutgers, which was founded 10 years before America and which had an academic hall on its Newark campus seized in 1969 to force a commitment to increase minority enrollment and faculty hires. The revolutionary action at Rutgers-Newark led to the creation of the Educational Opportunity Fund, which increased minority enrollment at all university campuses in the 1970s, 80s and beyond.

But what do I know?

Today my hire may be seen as something “historic,” but 30 years ago, this former 18-year-old, first-generation university attendee just marked it as the day I officially became a supposed former Quad dweller.

Photo: Walker from the 1986 yearbook, The Experience.

Steven T. Walker is a 1986 graduate of Livingston College at Rutgers University.