

Livingston College in the Early 1970s: A Great Social Experiment

By Richard D. Apgar, LC'75

[Read more Livingston College Alumni Memories.]

I attended Livingston College while the Vietnam War was still raging although we were told it was winding down. I survived three selective service draft lotteries and considered myself lucky enough to continue my degree despite the fact that my classmates were still dying in a useless war. There were still plenty of things to protest, and Livingston College saw its share. In those days (1973 -1975), Livingston College became a great social experiment. Rutgers University opened its doors to every citizen of New Jersey and at Livingston we all gathered for what I consider the best education in the world. I was raised in a farming community in western Morris County and earned an AA degree from Morris County Community College in the summer of 1973. I was excited about being accepted at Rutgers and looked forward to real college dorm life. After seeing years of war and protest and finally seeing real social change I knew my time at Rutgers would be special.

The day I checked into my dorm room I was paired with a black student. I was willing to share my dorm room and hoped that we could prove that blacks and whites could be friends after all. We were all ready to stop the rioting and it seemed the war would end and real change could take place. That night I couldn't get to sleep. My new roommate insisted on playing music all night even after he fell asleep. When he did, I reached over and turned the radio off and fell asleep myself. The next morning my roommate moved out after a brief discussion about keeping my hands off his stuff. I guess the great social experiment wasn't going to work right away. There were still plenty of protests going on. I would wake up some nights to hear close order military drill going on in the courtyard at 2 a.m. by uniformed young Black Panthers. I would talk about what I saw to others students in the dorm later on. They were part of the great social experiment as well. They were from inner cities and rural towns from across the tri-state area. They were Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Muslims and Protestants. They were black, white and Spanish, and foreign students from all five continents. Eventually we all got to know each other, and learn from each other, and finally love each other.

One dorm mate was a tunnel rat recently back from Vietnam. He was a brilliant chess player and it took me six months to finally win a game from him. He called me the Professor because I would help him in his English composition class. One day I knocked on his door to have another chess game and when he answered he wouldn't let me in. He told me to go away because he joined the Black Panthers and had taken an oath to kill a white man a year. It was for my

own good, he told me. I was a bit surprised but after witnessing years of riots and shootings it was understandable. I never saw him again after he left the dorm.

There were also other examples of racial tension around campus. Sometimes angry black students would knock down food trays from nerdy white students in the cafeteria. There were a few fistfights but mostly everyone learned to get along, especially after the college approved an on-campus tavern. It was in the Livingston College beer hall that the great social experiment finally succeeded.

The education I received was spectacular. Some professors taught from a somewhat socialistic approach, others from a strong capitalistic approach and yet others from a wonderfully creative approach. The best teacher of Shakespeare I ever encountered was Miguel Algarin. He truly brought the works of Shakespeare to a modern political light. Perhaps when the Livingston College tavern came to be, Professor Algarin conceived his idea of the Nuyorican Poet Society. It was sheer pleasure to read poetry in New York City with Miguel and be a part of his dream in the early days. Sometimes other English literature classes were held in the tavern or at times in the home of a professor in a more relaxed, less formal way where true creativity and expression was unencumbered.

Livingston College was indeed a trip. The class of 1975 graduation ceremony was like a carnival. Some wore the traditional cap and gown while others dressed in African ceremonial tribal dress. Still others wore tattered blue jeans and some decided not to attend at all. I remember my father saying it was the strangest graduation ceremony he ever saw. Thinking back, I would have to agree. And as I think back, I remember trying to date girls from Douglass College and trying to make out with them at the Passion Puddle. Sometime I would take my dates into the woods at Livingston where there was a large tree with a rope tied to its branch where you could swing over a muddy ravine and pretend to be Tarzan. Finally, there were plenty of fun frat parties to attend on Union Avenue in New Brunswick or simply have fun dining out at Tumulty's Pub or a wonderful pizzeria whose name I can't remember.

Looking back, all I can say is that the education and life's lesson learned at Livingston served me well. I was able to have a wonderful career in the fire service Industry. I became a fire chief and a business owner. And now that I am retired, my only regret is that during my time at Livingston I never attended enough football games. Go Scarlet Knights!

Richard D. (Rick) Apgar is a 1975 graduate of Livingston College at Rutgers University.

(Contact Rick via email.)

(Spam-resistant email link provided by WillMaster.)

