

This old house

Conversion of fraternity to office brings back powerful memories



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"Broke into the old apartment. This is where we used to live. Why did you clean the floors? Why did you paint the walls? Why did you plaster over the hole I punched in the door?"
Barenaked Ladies, "Old Apartment"

There once was a kid from Rapid City.

This kid attended the University of Nebraska from 1994 to 1995. He was a news-editorial major and transferred in as a freshman. He didn't know a soul in this state. All his friends and family were in South Dakota. This kid from Rapid knew UNL was one of the best places to be for journalism. So, he left everything and everyone behind.

The kid from Rapid had lived in the residence halls at Black Hills State. He didn't really care for the experience. So, he filled out a rush card as another option. A few weeks before he moved to Lincoln to take summer classes, the kid got a call from the president of one of the fraternities on campus. Nice sounding kid named Andy Huff. Huff, coincidentally a broadcasting major, was also from Rapid City. He came and talked to the kid, took him out to lunch and they watched the NBA finals.

After deciding Huff was OK, the kid signed the rush card. After saying goodbye to his friends and his girlfriend, the kid from Rapid packed and moved to Lincoln. When he got here, he found the house and met his new

brothers. Since it was summer, there were very few guys there, but they were friendly enough, and the kid felt he had found a new home.

This is the story of that home. 420 University Terrace. Then it was known as the TeKE house. It wasn't big or fancy. Heck, it was actually a bit of a dump. But it was the kid's. It was his just as much as it was Thor's or Krohn's or Coon's or Animal's.

It's not there anymore. Sure, the structure is still there, but the house is gone as sure as if it had been razed by all the bulldozers in the state. See, the problem with TKE was most of the guys hated the greek system. They never fit in with the other "frat-rats." So when rush time came, the guys that signed up didn't like the TeKE's approach to the greek system.

Those who liked their independence didn't rush. Soon, too many guys dropped out or graduated, and the house was no more. Of course, by that time, the kid was long gone. Oh, and he didn't go by "the kid" then.

He was F*ckner. These are his memories.

The door to his room opened into the stairwell. His was the only room like that, so he took to calling it the F*ckner Memorial Wing. It was funny then. His was a single room, chosen out of fear of another bad roommate experience. But it was rarely empty. F*ckner made friends in the house quickly. F*ckner went to baseball games with the guys. He helped paint, put down new carpet and fix the windows in the house. Life was looking good.

Then, F*ckner learned his ex-girlfriend was coming to school here.

But hey, F*ckner had matured. Now he was a fraternity guy. He was proud of the house. Sure, it was still a bit of a dump. But it was his house by then. So when she moved down, F*ckner invited her over to a party to meet everyone. Strictly platonic, right?

Of course.

Over the next few weeks (days?), the ex and F*ckner found it hard to just be friends.

It wasn't long after that the former ex-girlfriend moved in to F*ckner's house. Granted, she didn't really move in. That would be against UNL policy. She just slept there six nights out of the week. She showered at her dorm, but she lived with F*ckner.

And all was good. For a few months. Then, F*ckner began changing. He was getting dark and moody. He wasn't sure who he was.

The kid from Rapid never had a girl who wanted to spend the rest of the day with him, let alone the rest of her life. The kid from Rapid never woke up to watch a pretty girl's hair shine in the moonlight coming in from the window. The kid from Rapid didn't know what to do.

So he started staying up late, while the former ex-girlfriend slept. Wondering what was happening. What to do. Of course, all the late nights of thinking led to late mornings sleeping. Then late afternoons. Finally, early evenings. The former ex-girlfriend was concerned. She began questioning F*ckner's moods all the time. Which, of course, just made matters worse.

All his friends in the house tried to help him. Tried to get him to study. To focus.

Eventually, F*ckner dumped the again-ex-girlfriend.

It was too late to change that particular ship's course. F*ckner was in a downward spiral of F's. So he left. While he was gone getting his head right, he heard from his old roommates

that the house was in lots of trouble.

Then he heard the house was closing.

By the time the kid from Rapid returned as "A.L.", his house was gone. The brothers he missed all the years he was gone were scattered to the winds.

Some were still here. The Captain offered to let A.L. move in with him. Crack was engaged and graduating. Reuter and Medina were still the same guys. But A.L. always felt he had let all those guys down. Like somehow, if he'd stayed, he could've saved the house. Others weren't there. Some graduated and were off at jobs. Others, like him, had deserted and ran. One died a month after his 21st birthday.

He felt he had abandoned those guys the most. He was a bit ashamed whenever he saw them.

Now, A.L.'s nearing the end. He's made new friends and strengthened some of the old relationships.

More of the guys are married now



aren't. A.L. still never sees many of his old brothers anymore, but now it's because he's too busy working at the newspapers.

The last link to his past is almost gone. The house ... THE house with all the memories, good and bad, is almost gone. The university bought his house and is converting it into an office building.

Every night, going home from work at the Journal Star, A.L. drives by the old house. He has a mental catalog of each wall, beam and joist that has been ripped out.

Soon, there will be nothing but a distantly familiar shape at 420 University Terrace. That's it.

It won't be a home. Not to A.L. Not to anybody.

"Only memories. Faded memories. Blending in to dull tableau. I want them back. This is where we used to live."

Prisoners of war

Messages of Vietnam should still resound in hearts, minds of our generation



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Our generation saw one short war, and almost every soldier came home breathing.

Our generation didn't learn that Americans die in American offensives.

Our generation can't fathom what it means for U.S. soldiers to be held prisoners of war. We can't imagine what awaits the first 2,000 U.S. ground troops to go overseas in a conflict that lacks strong support at home.

Thirty years ago, our parents knew exactly what a troop deployment meant. It meant your brothers, husbands, sons and neighbors didn't come back alive.

It started with a draft notice in the mailbox, then a physical exam.

October 1966, Austin, Texas: My father, 20-year-old Jerry Don Gibson, stood in line with dozens of young men who had been called up in the Vietnam draft.

They had finished all but the last phase of their physical exams, had walked up a flight of stairs and now eked through an aging room, still standing in their underwear. A man

sat at a worn, wooden school desk at the far end of the room.

The man was a gatekeeper. Any guy with a physical reason not to serve in Vietnam would present his excuse to the man. The man would listen, then mark their examinations "Pass" or "Fail."

Most guys who got a Pass mark would find themselves at basic training in no time. One stamp at a time, my father got closer to the man whose Pass stamp could have very well read "Go die in Vietnam."

My dad wasn't supposed to be there. The University of Texas hadn't sent the notice saying he was in the top third of his class and exempt from service. A half million guys his age were getting shot at overseas. When one died, the United States recruited another. Thus the line. It was getting shorter.

One guy wore silk boxers and claimed he was gay. "Pass!" The guy in front of me dad showed long scars from knee surgery, but said he had walked up those stairs to the room. "Pass!" My dad had no excuse. "Pass!"

This story - now in my words - came alive with my father's voice this spring break.

I had gone home to think about picking a law school in California and planning a wedding. I didn't expect talking about my post-graduation options would have such a profound effect on my parents.

My future reminded my parents of their past, and my dad recalled how his post-graduate options were determined by the war overseas.

He first stayed out of the jungle

by scoring high on tests and acing his college courses.

In 1966, when he stood in the physical exam line, college graduates were assigned as platoon leaders and led other men through the jungle. Many came home in black bags courtesy of the "friendly fire" of their own men - men who were damn tired of losing a hated war fought in a foreign jungle.

As my father's story unfurled, I saw that 30 years ago, a college degree was not a ticket to greater things for many men. It was not a ticket to a new life, new school, new job or new car.

Degrees were death certificates.

Of course, many men went to Vietnam and made it back alive - men like Nebraska Sen. Chuck Hagel, for whom I have great respect.

And many Vietnam survivors seem outwardly fine, like my childhood neighbor, Mr. Davis. Mr. Davis would take a hard swing at anyone who woke him up at night. He had slept too many nights in the jungle, his wife said. It was a reflex.

This year, a good friend's father - a Vietnam veteran - has spent each day on his couch. He lost his job and just talks about being a veteran, mistreats the aging dog and builds his gun collection. The war could kill him yet.

Other survivors, like one staff member's uncle, came back crazy, then drank themselves to death.

My father's story is different. Though he took two physical examinations for the draft, he didn't go to Vietnam.

Instead, he and my mother moved to Fort Worth so he could make himself viable to the war effort by developing better radar at General Dynamics. He started work the Monday after he graduated. He didn't walk the stage.

When the draft board goofed and didn't mail a deferment questionnaire to General Dynamics in 1970, my father again took the physical and passed. He went before an appeals board that voted 2-1 to keep him out of Vietnam. He didn't expect that vote. He thought he'd be in combat.

Considering my father never walked in the Vietnam jungle, you could say he had a pretty lucky go of the era. Considering the evening news featured pictures of American body bags for a decade, you could say he ought to be grateful for his life. Well, yes. He is both fortunate and grateful.

But he hasn't forgotten. Because 30 years ago, an entire generation went to war in Vietnam, and though they left that war in 1973, it never left them.

"This is our lives," my mom said. "I just didn't believe that war was just. I couldn't justify one life being spent, and here we were in the middle of it."

Now, we members of Generation X will watch American soldiers go to Kosovo. I don't believe that battle is "another Vietnam" because of political differences between the two conflicts.

I do believe American soldiers will die fighting Milosevic's army. I also believe, unless our genera-

tion learns about Vietnam and appreciates the gravity of our parents' sacrifices, we will romp through graduation and the choices available to us as graduates and not notice history repeating itself before it's too late.

We who grew up among Vietnam survivors must educate ourselves. We must learn what started the Vietnam war and why the United States got entrenched in a war that wasn't its own.

Then we must promise our parents, ourselves and our children that, as we make our picks from grad schools, jobs and life partners, we also will choose never to allow our nation to "Vietnam" a generation again.

When the first American soldiers die in Kosovo, our generation will learn the hard way that American offensives kill Americans, too. Maybe our collective memory will sharpen, and we'll think of those guys in line for physicals for the Vietnam draft - those guys who knew, standing in their underwear, the "Pass" stamp could be their death sentence.

Maybe we'll visit the graves of friends and relatives that died in Vietnam. Maybe we'll speak to prisoners of war who came home and realized we left many P.O.W.s behind.

Or maybe we'll think of how we don't want our spouses and children standing in lines in their underwear before leading platoons through foreign jungles and decorating the T.V. news with their body bags.

Maybe one choice for us as graduates will be peace.