The Kibbutz

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I’d never cooked a meal in my life, probably didn’t even boil an egg, and suddenly there were nine hungry guys coming to the table expecting to be well-fed.

In housing almost unknown to Dordt College students today, for years scores of their predecessors lived off-campus, many in sometimes dreary basement apartments in ordinary houses in town. Most upperclassmen left dorms as soon as they could because what off-campus housing lacked in convenience—cold, windowless apartments sometimes a mile away from classrooms—they made up for in freedom and real-money savings.

And, if you were really blessed, you got a palace, where you ate more sumptuously than anyone on campus. Down in the spacious basement at the Van Groningen house on South Main, Paul Van Dyken (’77) baked 15-17 loaves of bread every week for his eight voracious roommates, not to mention a pan full of cinnamon rolls for Sunday morning brunch. That’s the kind of chef-manship that scared Witten when he moved in.

The Van Groningen basement offered some regal living, right across the street from the A & W (yes, there was one out there long ago), and spittin’ distance from Wal-Mart (which wasn’t on anyone’s radar, of course). On the menu, real meat too—steaks, chops, ribs—and lots of it.

The scariest part was cooking,” or so Clarence Witten (’78) remembers. And vegetables. Some guys had never heard of kale before it snuck into their salads after Charlie Claus (’78) planted it in a garden in the backyard.

Jack Oudman (’79) remembers juicy hams festooned in pineapple and cloves. Daryl Sas (’77) claims he probably relied on ease when it came his turn to cook: tater-tot hot dish, rice-tuna casserole, and some casserole with hamburger and rice. Daniel Van Heyst (’78) spent an entire Saturday picking apples from a backyard tree, then cooking applesauce that became a year-long staple of the Kibbutz diet. More with Less, an evangelical best-seller cookbook, the guys claim, was their food bible.
They called themselves—and the place they occupied—the Kibbutz, even though no one spoke Yiddish or blew a shofar. Dave “Bunny” Groenenboom (’78) pulled some tunes out of his harmonica and rather liked playing Larry Norman on the stereo set up just outside his room. Basically, Kibbutzers were good guys and terrific students. Take my word for it; I should know. My wife and I and our new baby lived just upstairs.

And studious. Very much so. With nine guys in a basement apartment, physical space was at a premium. Each little bedroom (there were five) had a desk or two. Some guys stayed home to study; others regularly visited the library, hung out there, even though it took a half hour to walk back to the apartment—often in January cold.

And, because they had to, they improvised. Craig Stockmeier (’77) used to crack his textbooks in a little projection room opposite the stage in what was—long, long ago—the Dordt gym. Groenenboom, who lugged hogs three nights a week at Sioux-Preme Pack, often studied, when he could, in the downstairs publication room of the SUB, a campus hangout that’s also long gone.

Most guys had bikes, although Kibbutzers caught rides to and from campus from a couple of guys with cars. Witten had a ’64 Chevelle wagon (see photo), a beast, he says, that became a Kibbutz taxi long before anyone ever heard of Uber. Groenenboom had a sweet old ’64 Rambler that got more than its share of use. Sas (’77) had a flame-orange ’74 Chevy Malibu, a cherry gas hog with a vinyl top. He says he kept it parked most of the time (“I’m Dutch. Cheap,” he says).

But most guys biked most of the time and walked when they just plain felt like it. Ed Kruis (’78) remembers those long walks, alone, almost rhapsodically.

“Some of the best memories I have are of the times I walked alone the two miles to and from campus in midwinter with frost encrusting my beard and mustache by the time I arrived at my destination,” he says. “Sometimes I would practice vocal exercises on the way, often I would pray or review for tests.”

Hard as it is to believe, those walks to campus could be insanely early. “I particularly recall marching to campus up Main Street for a 7:30 a.m. Philosophy 201 final just before the Christmas break,” he says. Students today might consider mid-winter 7:30 a.m. exams a form of abuse.

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Sas claims living in the Kibbutz prompted an invention he modestly says was his own. “I don’t want to claim that I invented the now ubiquitous book bag, but I was one of the first to buy a camping-style back pack and use it to transport books to and from campus as well as the occasional laundry run. I still have it!” Just as he still has the red, winter “snorkel” coat that, way back when, kept him warm on those long trips. And the receipt from his second semester tuition? $1,250, he says. Still has that, too, if you don’t believe him.

Dust-ups between nine roomies? Very few. Once, Kruis remembers catching some ire from his cousin Stan Kruis (’78) for not shaking up the milk before he poured it on his Raisin Bran—the milk was raw and from some local dairy. And Stockmeier claims smoke from the only cigar he ever lit up in his life (a friend’s)

And don’t think all meals were gourmet. Kruis will never forget some bombs: “Chicken livers (not fully cooked) with rice, and ‘fruchtreis’ (fruitrice) made with Kool-Aid.” He also mentions sweet-and-sour soy beans, which, not surprisingly, failed to become a classic Sioux County recipe. Steve Frieswyk (’78) remembers the time Kruis created a feast for about $1.50 tops, Frieswyk claims—rice and a bag full of chicken necks from the Auto Dine. That’s right—necks.

There was more (funny how food memories stick): Sas will never forget an ill-fated clam chowder somebody made by dumping a few cans of clams into gallon of milk, for which, by the way, he does take some blame. “I believe we had just dissected clams in an invertebrate anatomy lab.” He says he doesn’t recall hospitalizations.

You might wonder whether moving all students to an enclosed campus, as Dordt eventually did, was as beneficial for students as it was for institutional finance. Living off-campus required students to be vastly more responsible with their time and for their health.

What’s more, life in the Kibbutz demanded a division of labor that didled out strict requirements for each of the roomies. Van Heyst remembers how the work was meted out, the system for “managing meal prep and cleanup.” Two guys were designated shoppers, a couple

Aside from spending time at home, Schaap spent many hours grading papers on campus.
Adam Vander Stoep’s home community in Lyon County, Iowa, is different from New York City in most every regard, but Vander Stoep (’15) feels prepared for his new job as an assistant district attorney in the Bronx.

Like many born-and-bred residents of Northwest Iowa, Vander Stoep graduated from Western Christian High School in Hull, Iowa, in 2011 before enrolling at Dordt College. He chose to double major in criminal justice and political science to prepare himself for law school.

“I knew I wanted to become a lawyer already when I was in high school,” says Vander Stoep. His father, who has worked in law enforcement for decades and who currently serves as the Lyon County sheriff, played an influential role in this decision.

“All the cooks had one or two specialty meals each, so that simplified shopping and helped us get the quantities right. I seem to remember preparing a lot of spaghetti sauce for my turns.”

Strangely enough, no one remembers being cramped for space (it was a big basement!). If there were big fights, no one’s breaking the silence. Everyone remembers meals, both for the fare (good stuff and not so good) and the conversation and community.

The Schaaps (’70) lived just upstairs, but we were in our own little world, a young couple with a new baby, Andrea Jane (’98), and me with a brand new job—a college prof.

When these guys remember those days the way they do, I sure wish that once-in-a-while I could have been a fly on the wall, because I’m sure those meal-time discussions would have been worth the price of admission.

Several of them mentioned not remembering any tough times really, no nasty entanglements or sparring matches. They all remember a score of blessings.

Dr. Bill Van Groningen was not only a campus cop in 1978, he was also the point man for the whole Kibbutz. After all, they were all boarding in his parents’ house. Today, he’s a dean of students at Trinity Christian College. After reminiscing about life in the basement of that big house on South Main, he couldn’t help summarizing:

“I, for one, was taking five philosophy courses and one upper level math course in the fall and practice teaching in the spring. And the girl I’ve still never been able to get over agreed to marry me that October. Maybe we were too focused on matters beyond the basement to get too fussed by each other down there. Still, I now look back on that gift of kibbutz comradery as an all too rare gift of congenial community.”

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP (’70)