On Campus

Sentimental Coeducation

A shy freshman learned how to make friends the hard way.

By
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It was unheard of — in my Cuban family and largely first-generation immigrant neighborhood — for anyone to move out of the house before marriage. When I was applying to Columbia, the possibility of having a dorm room sounded utterly foreign to me. Everyone I knew in our town in New Jersey commuted to work, why wouldn't I commute to classes? Columbia was only an hour away by bus and subway, and, to my parents, a dorm was an unreasonable expense; I agreed. Still, I knew costs were not my parents' only concern; they gasped when they learned that I had to spend orientation week in Columbia's coed dorms.

When I arrived at Furnald Hall, I caught only glimpses of my neighbors, also commuters, and, for the most part, male. Since orientation activities didn't begin until the next morning, I stayed in my room that night. I had always been shy, even managing to graduate from an all-girls high school with few in my homeroom ever learning my name.

The next morning, it was I who gasped when I discovered that the shower room was coed. There were eight shower stalls, and although walls separated each one, the shower curtains seemed as thin as tissue paper. I was so terrified to be spotted taking a shower, I did something unconscionable: I locked the door to the entire room. Twenty minutes later, I emerged in my bathrobe to find a veritable lynch mob of 15 boys in the hallway. They muttered expletives under their breaths as I walked to my dorm room. That's when I discovered that, not only had I locked them out of the shower, I had locked myself out of my room as well!

The boys' grimaces quickly turned into grins as they watched me, dripping wet, knock on the RA's room and find that she was out. Just as their heckling grew louder, and I began to panic, a smiling female face appeared. It belonged to Karla Sanchez '92CC, and she quickly offered me her room to hide in until I could get a spare key.

That was easier said than done. The housing office in Hartley Hall said that I had to pick up the key myself. The attendant seemed unsympathetic to my plight — that is, the possibility of streaking across campus — but Karla convinced him to let her go as my proxy.

The elevator wasn't working, so Karla had to walk down from the top floor and across campus only to find out that in order to get the key, she had to present my identification card, which, of course, was locked in my room. Since her room's telephone line wasn't working, either, Karla had to walk all the way back to the room to find out my Social Security number before walking back again to finally retrieve the spare key.

Karla quickly left for what remained of the welcome brunch, and I changed into something a little more presentable. When I finally arrived at the brunch, and for the rest of the day, I made an effort to avoid the students on my floor. I couldn't bear the thought of any more heckling on my first day of college.

Of course, I did run into them — at the following event. But the boys were less intimidating up close than they had been as a faceless, angry crowd down the

hallway. They must have developed some sympathy after they showered because they seemed genuinely concerned about the odyssey Karla went through to obtain the new key. As I recounted the events, I quickly recognized the humor of it all, and soon the boys, who had once laughed at me, were laughing with me. I even came to consider these boys friends, later playing weekly basketball games with them in Dodge Hall.

Most of us commuter students became close quickly, because we were all sharing a not-so-typical college experience. We were from the metro area, and most of us — whether we were Korean, Chinese, Dominican, or Cuban — were children of immigrants. We didn't have to deal with a roommate or learn how New Yorkers walk and talk like other freshmen had to. We had to figure out how to feel part of a school that liked to emphasize that 98 percent of its students lived on campus. My tactic to meet new people was to simply greet everyone as a possible friend. This approach must have worked as I was elected to serve as the commuter representative to the student council at the end of September 1988. Most of all, I remained grateful to Karla, who has now made a profession out of rescuing people as a partner in a law firm.

As the year continued, my family would let me stay in friends' dorm rooms the nights I had council meetings. As it turned out, the only thing my parents liked less than coed dorms was the idea of their daughter walking through Port Authority late at night. I joined as many clubs and committees as I could — even the library restoration committee — just to stay on campus and be with my friends.

At last, in my sophomore year, I convinced my parents to let me rent a room in Ruggles Hall, which was as cheap as my commuting expenses. It was so small — one-third the size of the other rooms — that my new suitemates thought it was a closet. It was piled with all of their trunks and boxes, but there was just enough room for a desk, a dresser, and a bunk bed. No one could understand why I would want to live there, but I was happy just to have found a home at Columbia — with roommates to let me in.

Dr. Maritza Jauregui is currently an assistant professor of environmental health at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, where she can be found in class or serving on several committees when she is not waiting in the hallway for the custodial staff to bring the spare keys to her office.

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