

The Last Blast: 250 Gather to Say Goodbye to 20 Years of a Group House Group House

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The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Apr 29, 1985;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post
pg. C1



BY JOHN McDONNELL—THE WASHINGTON POST
Tomoaki Sasaki, John Gurley and Alex Heard, back row; Lisa Birchard, Theresa Kendrick, Carrie Lamson and Maureen Colihan, center; and Nancy Swenton, foreground, gather at 1856 Kalorama Rd.

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250 Gather to Say Goodbye to 20 Years of a Group House

By Richard Harrington
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In the midnight hour, the house on Kalorama Road is so full that the choice is to spill out onto the street or spill beer on a neighbor. To some it's just another monster party, Animal House in Adams-Morgan, but to others it's the final daze, the end of an era.

"So, you all moving out of here?" asks a stranger.

"Yeah, we're thinking about it," says journalist and humor writer Alex Heard.

Heard and the other seven "staff" at 1856 Kalorama Rd. didn't have to think too hard. Their minds were made up for them when they awoke several months ago to find a "For Sale" sign outside the front window. It was the first nail in the coffin (the last was the addition of "Sold" to the sign) for a group home that dated back to the '60s.

In the intervening years, several dozen people, mostly in their twenties and early thirties, had

passed through the sprawling seven-bedroom house. Saturday night, many of them came back for "Kaloramageddon, the Final Party."

By the time the party started, 1856 was a shell: most of the furniture already gone, the most recent housemates mostly moved out, some finding smaller houses and smaller communities. At times the crush made it look more like fraternity rush night, crowding out the eclectic detail of its past, but it was not hard to imagine better days, when 1856 evolved from a boardinghouse in the mid-'60s into a self-contained neighborhood by the mid-'70s, paralleling a generational transformation. The Kalorama Eight, needing to be out by tomorrow afternoon, went out with a bang.

The door was always open at 1856, the huge dining room table full and inviting, the big kitchen a beehive, the chatter inspired, friendships sustained. The idea seemed to be that people who knew people

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Group House

KALORAMA, From C1

were the luckiest people in the world, so it was little wonder that among the 250 or so at the long goodbye were alumni who came to look one last time at 10-year-old paint that would fade long before their memories. Some came from as far away as Connecticut; some came from around the corner.

"I walk in and it's exactly the same," says Jack Worden, who lived there for a couple of years in the mid-'70s under a crush of books that occupied his room, various closets, the hallway and the basement; now he owns Idle Time Books on Columbia Road. "It hasn't had *any* work done on it: the floors are still a mess, the walls are still dirty, the props in the bathroom are the same."

This is all said lovingly.

In fact, between Saturday night and Sunday morning (the party ended at sunrise), the clutter and the clatter of community that defined 1856 was no longer off the wall.

It was mounted on the wall:

Maureen Colihan's mutilated bumper, thrice hit, once by the police, who gave her a ticket . . .

Alex Heard's galleys for an essay on "taxidermy humor" that took four years to find a home . . .

John Gurley's bow tie and vest from his days as a waiter at Charley's Crab, "before he found a job as a lawyer . . ."

A handmade "Happy Birthday Cathy" card inscribed "Boy just think your 21" and annotated "Kathy, you're friend is an illiterate schlub . . ."

Also, fragments of a "Booze Pong" table, mummified blue jeans, a painting accurately titled "Naked Butt," posters from "Harlan County, U.S.A." and the 1980 Bike-In that defined dreams and aspirations for a generation. The first floor of the house had been transformed into a museum of contemporary artlessness, ephemera captioned and contained on well-worn walls.

"Hey, Alex, that's my vegetable brush," says Nancy Swenton, a film editor and the quintessential housemother since 1978. "How did *that* get up there?"

Heard feigns innocence, but it's as if the walls can talk, and their history is eloquent. They whisper that this is a house well lived in, that its spirit cannot be contained by bad news.

"It's a run-down place, but a lot of us enjoyed living here," says Heard. "[The new owner] thinks we're all on the poverty line, bums. He says, 'You don't have to live like this, you can make something of your lives.' Which is hard to stomach when you're trying to eat a Manwich."

There are fewer group houses these days, though transience and geography remain central issues. For instance, while Swenton grew up in Prince George's County and NBC News worker Mary Grace McGeehan trundled over from Virginia, Gurley is from Oklahoma, National Security Agency translator Theresa Kendrick from Minnesota and Tomoaki Sasaki, who works as a sushi chef, from Japan. Their's was a social embrace dictated by need and desire, the former for low-cost housing

and the latter for familial warmth in a world of singles—and occasional doubles.

"It used to be a great place to be unemployed," Heard adds. "People having interesting jobs is very much a recent development."

All around are the symbols of timelessness (a "Protest Sign—Bearer Unknown" from recent Central American intrigues) and of immediacy (hall bells that jingled when there was lovemaking in the room above).

But as fascinating as the objects are, this is a night for remembrance of things past, collective memory jostled not by a madeleine but by beer and beat.

"So nice to see you," Swenton says, hugging one visitor.

"So nice to be seen," he replies.

"There was so much *space*," Swenton sighs as she moves through long halls and dips into rooms still jumbled with artifacts, recalling group meals and other close encounters. "You could go three days without seeing people, but you always knew they were there. Our new house is so *renovated*. It doesn't have any hidden spaces."

And no hidden emotions. As more people arrive, conversations are punctuated with hugs and kisses, constant updating. "These are friends that are hard to lose," says Elizabeth McGraw, who lived at 1856 for two years before returning to Virginia.

"I'm finding antique roommates," laughs one man. "There's people I know in every room. It's a killer."

One woman, preferring to remain anonymous ("I'm a waitress, downwardly mobile"), sits in her old room, drinking in 10-year-old vibes, remembering a first love affair and rents that never broke the hundred-dollar barrier. "I slept on the bed from here until just last year," she says.

Heard, who'd lived at 1856 since 1980, is an instinctual archivist. Before this final party, he taped an oral history called "Kalorama Memories," tracking down 15 house alumni, including Camilla Meek, whom he portrays as the pivotal figure in house history. In the first floor museum, the dichotomy is pre-Camilla and post-Camilla, a sort of pre-Colombian distinction to indicate when 1856 was transformed from hippie boarding house to community.

Heard has also constructed a shrine to Joe Reiner, a decidedly shadowy figure who has risen from resident to Godot-like status on the basis of a journal and other materials he left behind. The Reiner Chronicles include poems about the loneliness of windshield wipers and the joys (albeit temporary) of being a firecracker on the Fourth of July, as well as this statement:

"I, Joe Reiner, want to be the greatest leader of men the world has ever known. May God be willing that this happen."

Nobody could find Joe Reiner to let him know about Kaloramageddon.

But others came. They were so much younger then, and they're older than that now, but even time and distance seemed irrelevant.

"It's been a swell reunion," says musician/painter Kendal Church, who lived at 1856 for three years and remembered a lot of "bohemian love meetings" in the basement. "It feels like I never left."

"This house has been great for me," he adds. "Everybody who has passed through it has grown a little."