

HALLS OF CACTUS Alumnus with a Disability Looks Back

In September 1961, 10 months after JFK's election, I became the second student with multiple disabilities at what was then called Texas Western College (TWC). Back then, I could walk, albeit with an awkward cerebral palsied gait, which made college life easier in a time before wheelchair accessible campuses.

Although I had been accepted at what I snobbishly considered a prestigious eastern college, my parents insisted that I attend TWC when Dad began working in El Paso. Reluctantly, I left Connecticut's lovely Naugatuck Valley, where we had lived since I was 10, for this unknown place in the desert. Yet, I was enticed by the promise of snowless winters and coeds wearing shorts in March.

The Dormitory

Another enticement was my parents' promise that I could live in a dormitory. With sudden unexpected trepidation, I moved into the dormitory on Labor Day. Later that day, I bought a freshman beanie and joined other freshmen in the traditional painting of the college insignia on a nearby mountainside. The same weekend I met my good friend, Billy Best, now a retired probation officer in Santa Cruz.

The only problem with dormitory life was my vanity in not asking for a chair to sit on in the shower. My perilous balance barefoot necessitated such concentration to remain upright under the unpredictable spray that I did not always get completely clean. During sophomore year, a student on crutches put a chair in the shower, but I was too vain to ask to use it. The elderly dorm mother, reflecting the values of many people at that time, had proclaimed that people who are disabled should not attend college, so I would not ask her help.

Two dormitory neighbors made homebrew in their room, but I only drank the stuff when I could not decline gracefully. It tasted awful, and there was no point in drinking it when Juarez, Mexico, was only five miles away. There we could buy mixed drinks for 25 cents apiece, while we contemplated the demise of our virginity for an additional \$2.50.

Even if I was too shy to participate in dormitory pranks, I still took special delight in each event. I did help several friends plan the capture of the alligator who resided in a pool in the city plaza. They dumped it in the campus swimming pool where it supposedly nipped a coed skinny dipping in the moonlight.

Another memory is of the only two bearded fellows in our dormitory. One night they drank too much and began fighting. Later, one of them returned to the dorm, looked at his reflection in the cigarette machine mirror, and put his fist through it. I wondered if, perhaps, that man was not attempting to hit the other drunk man; but was angry at himself.

Classes and Grades

Before classes began, I obtained permission to type all exams and in-class themes in the Dean of Men's Office, because I write very slowly and almost illegibly. Yet on the first day of class, the English professor did not know of this arrangement, so my first theme was handwritten and came back with a humiliating "C."

Throughout college I worried about getting the grades I would need to enter graduate school. By taking only 12 credits each semester and easy summer school courses, I had time to concentrate on difficult courses during the long semesters. To keep my grades up, I avoided a few difficult courses such as chemistry and Elizabethan literature. I can't quote Macbeth, and I don't know the chemical composition of sugar, but I did get into graduate school. My greatest college trauma was failing calculus, which was then the flunk out course for engineers. Even though 50% of the class failed and I was the only non-engineer in the class, I was never consoled.

Coeds

Eating our meals in the coed dining room was a primary attraction of dorm life. The prospect of watching lovely creatures slither between tables brought me to many meals, although rumored to be laced with saltpeter. The exertion of walking a block from the dormitory to the dining room was well worth the effort. Those were the days before the sexual revolution, but discussions of necking and petting brought as much attention as spicier discussions do today.

Those were sexually repressed days and once a young lady came to dinner in a strapless dress, I could think of nothing else for days. Generally, such thoughts only occupied my adolescent mind 80% of the time.

One way to meet women was by hitchhiking to class. (I was 30 before I learned to drive a car.) People came to know me and often stopped. If a coed gave me a ride more than once and was not wearing a wedding or engagement ring, I thought about asking her out. I was rarely that bold, but I thought about it a lot.

My Job

During my junior and senior years, I worked on the student committee which arranged lectures, dances, and art exhibits. This was my first exposure to bureaucracy and provided an introduction to brainstorming. During one meeting, we were searching for themes that might attract cultured Eastern students and faculty. I introduced a variation of the concept of "Halls of Ivy" and spent a half-hour explaining the virtues of a recruiting campaign based on the theme "Halls of Cactus.", that monolog was the precursor to many arguments that I made before bureaucratic throughout my career. The two deans for whom I worked were unusually patient teachers!

My makeshift office in a basement storage room next to the bowling alley had advantages. I learned to recognize the number of pins knocked down from the sound, and my Student Union Building key permitted my friends and me to indulge in occasional nocturnal ping-pong games.

Conclusion

The deans, student activities staff, faculty, and students all took an interest in me. Several professors spent long hours advising me on a research project which was published in a scientific journal. At TWC I was a big fish in a small pond and received encouragement and assistance unavailable at most universities. That support system was probably more effective than any provided today by the most sophisticated disabled student services office; it enhanced my college years.

Several years after I graduated, Texas Western College became the University of Texas at El Paso, and that is where I tell people I went to college. After all, why shouldn't I benefit from the college's increased prestige?

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