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04 Town-Gown Time Capsule

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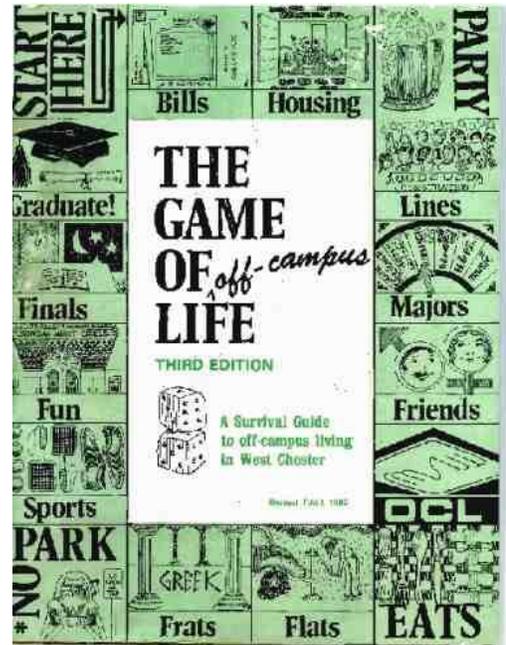
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Town-Gown Time Capsule

By Jim Jones

During the discussion at West Chester Borough Council's Public Safety committee meeting on Tuesday, April 8, 2008, mention was made of a West Chester University technical writing class that is composing a "guide to off-campus living" for their semester project. This was not the first time the idea has surfaced, as shown by this example of a similar publication produced in 1982.

"The Game of Off-Campus Life," 3rd edition, was published at a time when Town-Gown tensions were on the increase. The success of the first off-campus student rental units in the 1960s attracted "property investors" whose interests focused more on income than on neighborhood harmony. Coupled with the hedonism of the "sex, drugs and rock-n-roll" generation, residences in the Borough's southeast were transformed into "party houses" at a rapid rate. Borough government responded with a rental inspection program, rental inspection fees, rules for the conversion of houses into rentals, and the parking permit program, among other initiatives. The University (then known as West Chester State College) also responded by making violations by off-campus students subject to the school's judicial system and cracking down on open parties held at fraternity houses. Meanwhile neighbors discussed the creation of a "town watch" in the Southeast, linked up with the University and the Mayor to form the Town-Gown Council in 1986, and formed Civic Action South East, the Borough's oldest continuously active neighborhood association, in 1987.



Cover of the 1982 Guide

In the midst of all this a group of WCU students decided to see if they could make a difference. In the spring of 1979, members of the Off-Campus Student Association put together a handbook for students living off campus. It covered basic life skills, like how to read a lease and plan a budget, but it also included more advanced skills like automobile repair.

The main sections cover "Housing," the "Apartment Lifestyle," "Commuting" and "Community Life." The Housing section covered issues that are just as relevant today as they were a quarter-century ago, like finding the right place, selecting your roommates, dealing with paperwork and legal issues, and how to move out. There was also a section on the Borough's Housing Code that contains pretty much the same things that appear in today's code, although landlords are no longer allowed to create apartments in basements, no matter how "dampness-proof" the walls and flooring are.

One of the longest sections covered leases, with subheadings like "Defensive Lease Reading" and "Obnoxious Lease Clauses." This was an era when rental housing was not well regulated,

and as first-time renters, students were especially vulnerable to unscrupulous landlords. The Guide warned against leases that included waivers of the tenant's right to privacy and right to a jury trial, or clauses that allowed rent increases in mid-lease, or that required the tenant to pay the landlord's legal expenses no matter the outcome of a dispute.

The "Apartment Lifestyle" section contained mostly practical information, like how to open an electricity account, how to deter thieves, and what to do if roaches invade. There was a longish section on budgets and finances that included the contact info for six local banks (none of which still exist in 2014 when this article was last updated). The other long section covered food in all of its aspects -- how to balance a diet, how to save money, how to prevent grease fires while cooking, and so on.

The first paragraph under "Parking" in the "Commuting" section began: "When you return in the fall, the first problem you will encounter, even before you walk into your first class, will be parking." How true then and how true now! The Guide offered the same solutions that are available today -- park on South Campus and take a shuttle bus to class, carpool with other students, and for a few lucky ones, buy a parking pass from the Borough.

One thing that is not likely to appear in the 2008 version was the section on "Do It Yourself Auto Repairs." The 1982 Guide offered five pages on maintaining a car, reading repair books, and trouble-shooting car problems, but automobile technology has changed a great deal since the days when you could set the spark plug gap with a matchbook and change brake shoes with two wrenches and a screwdriver. Electronic ignition, anti-lock braking systems, and fuel injectors all require more tools and know-how to maintain, while the demands of school and part-time jobs leave less time for students to acquire them.

Another section that will probably not make it into the 2008 version was called "Hitchhiking." After pointing out twice that hitching is "dangerous," the 1982 Guide described it as "cheap, almost always available, and sometimes the only way to get where you want to go." With the "danger" in mind, the 1982 Guide offered tips: don't hitch alone, don't get into a car that already has three or more people in it, make sure the door on your side has a working handle, etc. It seems unlikely, however, that the University's current legal counsel would advise anyone to put this kind of information into a publication with "WCU" on the cover.

The last section on "Community Life" came the closest to the goals selected by the University Area Neighborhood Task Force. After a brief statement about cooperating with Borough residents and a description of Borough government, the 1982 Guide provided a page about voter registration and absentee ballots. That was followed by a long section on "Recreation" which revealed, among many other things, that there was still one movie theater in the Borough in those days (the High Street Theater at 120 N. High Street), two drive-in theaters within ten miles of the Borough (Exton, and US 202 south), six places to see live theater productions between Valley Forge and Kennett Square, and a ski slope in Chadds Ford.

The last section listed places to eat in the Borough, and not surprisingly, almost none of them survive under the same name today. Burger King still occupies the corner of High and Price Streets, and you can still visit the Courtyard Inn, DeStarr's Restaurant, Dilworthtown Inn, and

two McDonalds (east and south of town), or get pizza at New Haven, Las Vegas, Pizza Hut, and Sam's Pizza island. On the other hand, there is no more Gino's, Hardee's, Ivory Chopsticks, Lamp Post, American Restaurant or Roy Rogers, and the Niels Street Deli has become the Riggstown Oven while the South End Deli (at 137 Lacey Street) is now a student rental property.

The names of the members of the Off-Campus Student Association who created the guide appear nowhere in the book, so there is no way to know where they are today or what they remember about the effort to make this book. But we should probably thank them for two reasons: for creating a "time capsule" for Town Gown relations and for promoting conversations about issues that affect everyone in the Borough.

POSTSCRIPT: In March 2014, Dr. Jones received two emails from Tom Lordan, who identified himself as the "Director of Off-Campus Life" at the time the Guide was created, and offered the following:

Off the top of my head, The Game Of-Off Campus Life was written and produced by:

Student Interns: Mele Eastburn, Pam Ehly

Graduate Intern: Scott Leggett

Assistant Director of Off-Campus Life: Frances Davis

Director of Off-Campus Life: Tom Lordan

Cover and Interior Artwork by Joan Lordan

The Department of Off-Campus Life was created in the Spring of 1978. The first edition of this publication was produced by the Universities Printing Facilities in Harrisburg with expert technical assistance in West Chester by Ann Rink (?) of West Chester University's Graphics and Printing Department. Major inspirational credit goes to SUNY Binghamton whose guide served as a model for us.