

FROM GRAD HOUSE TO GRAD CLUB

By Andrea Gunn

The Grad Club at Queen's has made a name for itself as a home for great music. In 2009, it was named by CBC Radio listeners as one of the top ten best clubs for live music in Canada. Not bad for an old Victorian house that hosts some of Canada's best musicians in what is essentially still a living room. The Club, as well as adding to the local music scene, provides a networking space for Queen's 2500 graduate students, hosting meetings, fundraisers, and the occasional lecture.

Today's Grad Club, at 162 Barrie Street, is the third version of a campus home for Queen's grad students. Its first incarnation was a little house on Stuart Street, back in 1963. It all started with the creation of the Graduate Student Society the previous year. Queen's had experienced a huge growth in the numbers of graduate students in the 1950s and early 60s. In 1950, the University had 75 graduate students. By 1962, it had 351.

In January, 1962, a group of graduate students met to discuss the need to create a graduate student association. Don Stewart, MSc'64, was one of them. "I got involved in the Graduate Student Society just as it was being formed," he said. "There were concerns about getting year-round health coverage for grad students, [Queen's coverage at the time only covered students for the 8-month school year, and didn't cover dependents] and housing." The graduate students had very different issues to deal with than the undergrads, and had few services to address them. "If you were a grad student in Civil Engineering, you were lumped in with Civil Engineering undergrads. There was a feeling that there had to be better representation."

Don's friend Tony Tawil, also MSc'64, got involved, too. "When I got to Queen's, the graduate students basically had special needs. A good number of us had wives and children. Most of us were not Canadian. Most of us needed to find digs in the city. Spouses needed help finding work. The AMS did not cater to these needs of the graduate students."

The newly formed Graduate Student Society also envisioned a space of its own, where grad students from all departments could meet, exchange ideas, and socialize. They started their own publication, the *Graduate Gavel*, and Tony was its first editor. An early issue discussed the society's vision for a graduate house:

...a centre where graduate students of widely diversified interests and departments may meet for intellectual and convivial exchange. ..Once such a centre is established, the GSS will be able to hold cultural and social events on a regular basis, and gather into a cohesive group all those students now working in solitary luxury (?!) , convinced that they are neglected and overlooked.

Queen's administration was amenable to this idea. In May, 1963, the GSS was offered the use of a university property at 211 Stuart Street. Queen's offered the house without rent, if the GSS would carry the heat, utilities, and maintenance expenses, and could appoint someone accountable for the house. The *Gavel* reported in May:

Obtaining the Graduate House has had its ups and downs in the past month. It proved to be a trail of nerves and tact on the part of the President. Mr. Stewart can be comforted with the consolation that the prize is largely his and adds another to the many feathers in his cap. And while we feel indebted to the University for its generosity and cooperation, may we exhort all Graduates to make use of the House, especially at this formative period.

Donations to furnish the house trickled in from faculty, students and the community. The house had four bedrooms, so the GSS was able to offer accommodations upstairs to six graduate students, making a slight dent in the housing shortage. Their rents, \$25 a month each, also helped to keep the house operations going.

A 1962 issue of the *Gavel* discussed rumours about a graduate centre as an addition of the new student's union, but said that the only facilities specifically for grad students would be residence rooms. "Vice-Principal Conn, when unofficially consulted about the future of Graduate House, thought that we could not hope for a period of four to five more years before it is torn down..." There was always a hope that the Graduate Society would have a permanent location, but it this wasn't to be it.

In October 1963, the *Gavel* proudly announced that Grad House now had a piano. The paper exhorted graduate students to take full advantage of the facility. "There are few, if any, places in Kingston, other than Graduate House, where graduate students are able to argue the merits of Socialism, Freud, the sex life of rats, or what constitutes compulsion, at 4:00 A.M. The freedom to communicate ideas without the interference of landlady, waiter, or constabulary is indeed attractive."

Don Stewart also remembers a lot of music at the Grad House. "Several of us played instruments. I played guitar at the time. We were just jamming. There wasn't really enough room to dance," he says. There were also educational sessions at the house. Don's wife Nora, MSc'65, remembers going to a noontime lecture given by a man from the Biology department, who spoke about his Korean war experience.

There was also the occasional mishap. Don says, "There was a dishwasher in the house, and none of us had any experience on how much soap to use. The dishwasher was beside a stairwell. It overflowed, and we ended up having to shovel soap out of the stairwell."

The GSS also organized summer activities, as its members were in Kingston year-round. Tony and Don were on the Civil Engineering softball team, playing against other departments. The social activities and sports offered by the GSS offered an appealing alternative to long hours in the lab for engineering students like Tony. "Generally, we did not have time to participate in the undergraduate sports," he says, then adds, "-- mostly because we were not that good! But it was a lot of fun." He remembers the players ("and our cheering fans!") going to Graduate House for a beer after the game.

Although a number of the graduate students in 1962 were women, the majority were men. The Graduate Wives Club also formed in 1962, and made use of Graduate House. The program for the fall term of 1963 included coffee parties, educational films on child-rearing, and a "'Slim and Trim' evening with Miss Rosemary Campling, an Instructress from the 'Y' with some assistance for our figure problems.

Wear slacks." A few years later, the call-outs to Graduate Wives were a little more informal. Here's one from 1967:

Are the four walls closing in on you? Are you tired of television, of tip-toeing around the house while your husband studies? Want to get away from the children for an evening? If so, come and meet your fellow-sufferers at the Grad Wives Club. The meetings are alternate Thursdays at the Graduate House...

Music was a constant at the Graduate House over the years, whether it came from jamming with guitars, or dancing to a record player, or listening to student and local bands. The West Indian Steel Band was a popular draw at the house.

Richard Devereaux, MSc'68, was house manager from 1965 to 1967. "My main chore was to collect the rent from the others. It was about \$25 a month." Another important job was to supply refreshments with the introduction of a beer vending machine. "I got a soft drink cooler, and modified the coin operation, so it would take 25 cents, instead of 15 cents." He also kept the machine stocked. "I had a 1965 Mustang convertible. I'd go to the Brewer's Retail on King Street and get 10 cases of beer at a time. I could pack exactly 10 cases in my car, if I took out the spare tire. It was a very methodical process."

The first Grad House was sparsely furnished. "There was very little furniture on the ground level, because we used it for parties," says Richard. "We had a record player, and could pack 60 or 70 people in that little room. "

By 1968, Graduate House was heavily used, both as a drop-in centre for graduate students, and for organized parties. It became common practice for different departments to sponsor "grogs" after home football games. One particularly memorable do was a Chemistry-sponsored "Foiled Again" party, which included live music by The Chateaux and the rooms artfully decorated with 1200 square ft. of aluminum foil from Alcan. The November *Gave!* that year reported on this and other activities: "The house, we know, is very small for the 800-odd graduate students on campus – but what sort of place do we want? Rollicking Rites – an informal gathering singing Irish and Scottish folk songs and ballads with a professional accordion player went over extremely well in Grad House. Two hundred people at the 'Foiled Again' party was rather a squeeze, on the other hand."

By 1969, there were nearly 1000 graduate students at Queen's. The little house on Stuart Street, besides being dingy and run-down, was feeling very small. That year, Fred Bigham was pursuing his PhD in Economics. "I went to Grad House for beer and conversation," he says. "Some nights, there was live music. But I wasn't involved [with the GSS] in any official capacity until the night I opened my big mouth. I recall having the conversation that this was really a small and cramped house. I remember saying something like, 'We deserve a better space.'" The next thing he knew, Fred had been appointed the chair of the New Graduate House committee. He spent the next few months scouring Kingston for appropriate properties, and meeting with members of the Queen's administration.

For about four months in 1969, Fred's search consumed most of his time. "This happened to coincide with the time when I met a young lady at a party. I was quite interested but didn't bother to call her. I was so focused on Grad House."

Then, 157 King Street East became available. The former residence for Army Commanding Officers, the house was up for sale by the federal government. The large yellow brick Victorian mansion featured a sweeping interior staircase, high-ceilinged rooms, and a coach house on the property. Queen's made a successful bid on the house, but it would take several months of renovation and refurbishment before the GSS could take possession. His task completed, Fred called the young lady he met at the party. "Nine months later we were engaged." (They are still happily married, and living in the Ottawa area.) For his work in finding the new house, Fred received a Tricolour Award in 1970.

The April 1970 Graduate student newspaper (no longer called the *Gavel*), promoted the new amenities:

[T]he new Grad House is one of the plushiest watering holes available to graduate students anywhere. Tastefully decorated by Fred (impeccable) Bigham, the house is open anytime as a lounge and meeting place for all members. Among the appointments are: a dart board, a piano, numerous couches, and a beer machine. The house is also available to groups; simply contact the House Manager.

The GSS signed a five-year lease agreement with the University for the property. The second Graduate House provided residence for 11 graduate students, plus the live-in House Manager and assistant manager. There were also lounges and a dance area, with both a record player and room for live music. Licensable bar areas were available for grad parties and departmental functions. The beer cooler tradition continued, although draft beer and hot pies were available on Fridays, starting in 1971. (Beer was sold at 3 bottles for \$1.) Rent in a double room in 1971 was \$45 a month, and there were now some rooms for women, as well as men. The main social event at Grad House was the weekly TGIF party, which saw about 300 grad students on Friday evenings.

The House Manager's duties included overseeing social activities, collecting rent, and buying magazines, records and tapes, and household supplies. He also kept track of the keys; the second house operated as a key club, with keys given out to all graduate students, so that they could access the locked house at all times. Graduate students could bring guests to parties, but they were required to sign in at the door. The beer vending machine at the house continued well into the 1970s: 1974 minutes of the GSS show that they voted to raise the price per bottle to 35 cents. "Due to the expense involved in changing the mechanism on the machine to institute this price change, it was suggested that we raise the price of beer to 30 cents, and try using a trust system to collect the other 5 cents." Later minutes don't show how well this system worked.

While the second location provided much-needed room, it wasn't the ideal location in the long-term. The GSS hoped to eventually move to a house more centrally located on campus, and began discussions with the university to transfer operations to another campus building when one became available. And in 1975, as the King Street house lease drew to an end, the GSS learned that the property would need costly renovations in order to qualify for a permanent liquor licence, according to new rules from the

Liquor Licensing Board of Ontario. The house also needed further renovations to meet fire code regulations to qualify as a boarding house. In the spring of 1975, the search began for a third location.

Once again, the University was able to help. 162 Barrie Street was owned by Queen's, and used as a rental property. The GSS request to utilize 162 Barrie Street as its new Grad House was accepted, and it opened for business in the fall of 1976. Like its predecessors, initially the club was solely for the use of graduate students and their guests (who were asked to sign in at the door.) According to the *Queen's Journal*, "The chief object of the house is to provide a quiet area for informal meetings, and it will be run in the traditional style of a faculty club."

What *was* new was the establishment of a separate board to run the Graduate Club. The board continues to this day, independent of student government. Virginia Clark, Artsci'94, the Grad Club manager explains: "Medical students at Queen's are part of the AMS, and until 2009, so were Education students. Other faculties are represented by the SGPS [Society for Graduate and Professional Students, the successor of the GSS.] The first directors were adamant that the club would be a space for all graduate and professional students at Queen's." Today, the board of nine has representation from all faculties and schools at Queen's.

In 1979, the Grad Club expanded into 164 Barrie Street, the other half of the duplex. The ground floor now has two large open rooms with a full bar and kitchen facilities. Other facets of the building remain untouched. For instance, from the front hallway, there are two stairways leading upstairs, each to its own warren of rooms.

When Virginia started working at the Grad Club ten years ago, there was little in the way of live music programming at the Club, beyond an open mic night. She started booking student and local musicians. Jill Barber Artsci'01, now a Juno-nominated musician, began singing at the Grad Club when she was a student. She was one of Virginia's first bookings. So were bands like The Stars, Grizzly Bear, and others who have gone on to play much bigger venues. The club now attracts many cutting-edge musicians (and a few big names) who like the intimate nature of the space. (The main room can barely seat 60 people.)

The other rooms at the Grad Club are also well-used, for book readings, poetry slams, and departmental socials, just like in the old days. "Rooms are booked solid," according to Virginia, for TA meetings, tutorials, film Fridays, and even some classes in law and biology. House space is also donated regularly by the board to local charities for their fundraisers. And while the days of 25-cent beer are long gone, the new Grad Club boasts a much better selection of beer than the old Grad House. In the 1980s, the Grad Club management began showcasing a new phenomenon – beer from microbreweries. Today, the club rotates a selection of about 50 different types of beer from a selection of Canadian microbreweries (plus a few imports).

Do you have stories or photos of Grad House or the Grad Club you'd like to share with Alumni Review readers? Send them to review@queensu.ca