On Campus

Love on the Beach

A husband remembers the highs in front of Low.

By
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|
Winter 2006-07



Alma Mater as lifeguard: Yaker's Low Beach weather report informed students of tanning conditions in front of the library. (Richard Yaker)

When I was an engineering student in the late 1980s, I spent much of my time on the steps in front of Low Library. I sat just to the left of Alma Mater, facing Butler. I went there every day — on nice days when everyone was out and we should have been in class, and on cloudy ones when I sat there alone with my headphones on. I was a member of Sigma Alpha Mu, and the pledges called me Steps Yaker, because

they knew they could always find me there.

There were two major parties that spilled out onto the streets when I was in school. The first was when the Mets won the World Series in 1986, and the second was when Columbia beat Princeton at Homecoming in 1988. It ended a 44-game losing streak that had lasted six years. My friends who graduated the year before me had never seen a winning game in their time at Columbia. That day, everyone came out to the steps, fraternities brought kegs, and even though it was a dry campus, the administration left us alone, probably because it was a once-in-a-lifetime event.

In the spring of my senior year, when the weather started warming up, my fraternity brothers and I decided to have a barbecue on the steps. We brought charcoal, ground beef, and hot dogs, and set up a tiny hibachi. At first it was only five or six of us, but by the time the sun went down, 40 people had come by. All Campus Security did was tell us to put our beer in paper bags. We assumed that if open bottles were forbidden, an open flame in the middle of campus certainly would have been too, but we did it anyway.

As a senior, I lived on 11 Schapiro, the new dorm that opened in 1988 on 115th Street between Riverside and Broadway. It was named after Morris Schapiro ’23CC, brother of the art historian and University Professor Meyer Schapiro ’24CC, and it allowed Columbia to provide four years of housing to College and undergraduate SEAS students. I was lucky enough to get a single, but even luckier that I met Caryn Shalita ’90CC, an English major and aspiring actress who lived on my hall. Soon we became friends, and one of the things we shared was sunbathing in front of the library. A lot of people spent time on the steps, but no one to the extent that we did. We brought blankets and towels as if we were at the beach, and we started posting a “Low Beach Weather Advisory” sign on Alma Mater, reporting winds, clouds, or clear skies and good tanning.

Caryn and I went on spring break that year with our friends, first to Florida to lie on the beach, then to New Hampshire to ski. On the way back to school we hit a Grateful Dead show in Albany. When graduation rolled around we put our gowns and caps on and, of course, headed to the steps. Joe DiMaggio received an honorary degree, and even though Caryn didn’t know a thing about baseball, she got a picture of him with her and her family. I wasn’t there, because I sat with the engineering students, but later she told me that just as they were posing for the camera, they saw an elderly woman struggling to make it down the stairs. DiMaggio excused

himself and escorted her all the way to the bottom — and then came back for the photo. Nearly ten years later, Caryn wrote an essay about it, calling him a gentleman and remembering the moment as a reminder of how she wanted to be when she grew up.

Shortly after graduation, I moved to Silicon Valley to work at a computer company, and Caryn traveled around Europe with a plan to return to New York and pursue acting. We stayed in touch, and by January 1991, our close friendship blossomed into a romance. She moved out west and we settled in Los Angeles, where the film jobs were. We were married in August 1993. In our wedding video, one of my fraternity brothers joked about how I was always hanging out in front of Low, and that I had a singularity of purpose — a certain girl in a blue bikini.

Caryn and I were married for 12 glorious years before she passed away in November 2005 from complications due to a skin disease that doctors were never able to diagnose. The steps are very special to me. They were not only part of my daily life for my four years at Columbia, but also where the most important relationship of my life began.

Last April, I was in New York on a beautiful sunny day. I took the train up to Morningside Heights, wandered around a bit, and stopped at Schapiro, which still looks the same. Then I grabbed a slice of pizza at Koronet and had lunch on my spot next to Alma.

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