

# The Cornell Daily Sun

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## The True Brotherhood on The Knoll

**Q**uestion: What would you call an all-male house on Cornell's campus that schedules regular meetings, demands serious commitment from its members and fosters a sense of meaningful brotherhood?

You'd be mistaken to answer "fraternity." The institution that best approximates these values is one you've probably never heard of: the Chesterton House.

Chesterton, located at 115 The Knoll, is a Christian living center home to 15 men. It strives, in its own words, "to help students think critically and Christianly on life, learning, and culture." I'd always wanted to learn more about the house, so I was thrilled when a friend invited me over for a tour and dinner.

One striking element of the house is its emphasis on self-governance. The house doesn't hire any staff, aside from a programmer, resident advisor and house minister. The men do all the cooking and cleaning themselves, assigning tasks according to a daily schedule. As I entered the house I saw four undergrads cooking an elaborate Sunday dinner for their housemates and a visiting pastor. I wondered if anything remotely similar was happening anywhere else on campus.

After seeing my friend's room, we encountered a number of his housemates in the nearby hallway. I asked them how they related to a campus culture at odds with their values.

Surprisingly, their responses were quite positive. One undergrad declared that his experience at a secular college forced him

to "integrate my faith with who I was" and "make my faith my own." Similarly, another said that the secular culture "challenged me to read up on my faith," and that it was "always interesting to engage with non-Christians."

The residents repeated this theme throughout the evening, leading me to an unexpected conclusion: They reap the rewards of a diverse student body in ways most of us cannot. Since they know exactly what they stand for, they're genuinely interested in learning something different from their peers. Ironically, their narrow-mindedness about certain things grants them the freedom to be open-minded about many other things. To that end, as my host told me, no topic of discussion is off-limits.

After this conversation we sat down to dinner. In gracious accommodation to my kosher needs, they prepared me a cold salad with Manischewitz dressing. A graduate student said grace, and, for the first time I can remember, someone thanked God for my presence.

Seeing I had earned their trust, I moved the conversation in a more controversial direction: I asked why they preferred living in a single-sex environment. Unsurprisingly, they believe it allows them to discuss certain "issues" in a more comfortable setting. One engineer used the analogy, "it's like going into a locker room ... you don't mind taking off your clothes. We don't mind taking our clothes off here." A peculiar image, certainly, but an effective one nonetheless. And despite our

elite culture's attempt to eradicate "men's space," I doubt most men at Cornell — or even women — would disagree. The men of Chesterton just have the courage to say this publicly.

Having been assured that Chesterton is home to Christians from many denominations, I then asked whether they would accept Mormons into the house. The resident advisor took this opportunity to discuss the house's standards: Residents are not allowed to drink to excess, they must conduct romantic relationships in accordance with Biblical precepts, but more importantly, they must affirm the

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*For Whom the Bellin Tolls*

Apostle's Creed, which declares Jesus the one Son of God. Since Mormons do not accept this doctrine, they cannot live in Chesterton.

It might seem strange — and perhaps even distasteful — that they place a higher value on proper beliefs than proper actions. However, I think it reveals the Chesterton House's great insight: True community cannot exist unless there's agreement on certain fundamental ideas.

We tend to extol Cornell's many communities — be they intellectual, Greek, extracurricular and so on. But these institutions lack the glue that binds the men of Chesterton together. Only shared, and yes, uncompromising conviction creates the sort of commitment on display at Chesterton. It provides a common language for exploration of the highest things, an endeavor that strengthens their bonds and fosters a sense of investment in one another.

A resident put it best: "Much of Christianity, to be lived out, must be done within the context of community. You

can't be a Christian on an island." Their communal mission is their religious mission. If Cornell's administration wants to understand how real brotherhood emerges, they'd be wise to stop by The Knoll.

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