*This chapter discusses College House and our Ist year.*

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**Medical School Beginnings**

“Look to the person on your right, look to the person on your left. One of the three of you will not pass at the end of the year.” This pronouncement was made by Professor Bromilow Bromilow-Downing, the Dean of the University. I, the first member of my family to go to University, sitting in the large Jameson Hall of the University of Cape Town in February 1968 with about 2,000 fellow first-year students, all young and fresh out of high school, was bothered by the statement which I remember to this day. I vowed that I would not be in the third that would fail.

I related this statement once to an American physician. He informed me that the statement made is a common one related at the first day of college. He also remembered what his Dean had said on his first day. “A third of you, the upper third, will be innovators and be at the cutting edge of your profession; the middle third will be good solid doctors, a credit to the profession.” He then hesitated, to draw the attention of everyone; people were wondering what the bottom third would be known for; “The bottom third will make all the money.”

I was very excited to attend the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the medical school. Just a few months earlier on the 3rd December 1967, Christian Barnard had done the World’s first heart transplant in a hospital with an unpronounceable name to those not living in South Africa - Groote Schuur – the big barn. This event was inspiring, and I voraciously read every word written about the operation and of Washkansky, the recipient who lived for 18 days. Never in my wildest dreams did I realize that 22 years later I would be appointed to the Chris Barnard Chair of Cardiothoracic Surgery.

I had done reasonably well at high school, but not well enough to get into university residence. My parents had accompanied me on the 600-mile trip from East London to Cape Town and had paid for a week's stay in a small hotel – the Glendower on Main Road Rosebank. During that week I was to find somewhere to stay. I eventually got into College House, a men’s residence, about a mile from the main campus. The only reason I got into the residence was that 18 students had left the first week because of an initiation or hazing process. The initiation process at College House lasted 6 months; a few years previously it had lasted a year. Actual physical abuse was not allowed, but verbal degradation and sleep deprivation, was the order of the day. People were leaving because they felt that they did not have enough time to concentrate on their studies or were bothered by the silliness imposed on them.

We were required to always wear suspenders, to wear an orange necktie around a shirt collar with old-fashioned wings, all of which signified that we were from College House. In the residence we were required to display a large circular name badge made of white cardboard with specific dimensions. Our name, where we came from, our high school and an assigned nickname needed to be written in a specific font with India Black ink. A slight smudge in the writing was a grievous error, requiring that one start again. Making an acceptable name badge took weeks. Every night after supper we gathered in a room upstairs and then, when loud shouts of "new man," echoed through the hallways, we rapidly moved downstairs where we were lined up against a wall. While lined up we were verbally abused and told we were useless. Our name-badge was scrutinized and universally faulted, our suspenders were never tight enough and were tightened again and again such that our trousers felt like they were constricting our necks and we were losing our manhood. We were expected to know every seniors name (which entailed studying the previous year's residence photograph for hours), which room in the residence they stayed in, what they were studying and what their academic and social year was (those that had failed exams and were repeating a year were deemed to have done a social year). Any deemed infraction was punished. A common punishment was an assignment to wake someone up at two-thirty am after a cold shower wearing only a towel wrapped around one's body (the water dripping off our body was checked to see that it was cold), then someone else was awoken at three am wearing the College House uniform for "new men" (the tightness of the suspenders was again checked) and the process was repeated for a few cycles waking someone else at half-hourly intervals after another cold shower and dressing. There were additional assigned duties - at six-thirty I had to awaken the senior I had been allocated and give him the news headlines. This entailed getting up early to glance at the headlines of the only newspaper delivered. If there were ten "new man" allocated this chore, then the newspaper was invariably in tatters afterwards. As one can imagine, the sleep deprivation imposed upon by this initiation process and expectation to do assignments and to pass exams, created incredible anxiety. The hazing was structured such that we were rapidly assimilated into the residence and within about two weeks we knew everyone's name and social history.

The initiation process knit us “new men” together and towards the end of the six-month period we were giving back to the seniors as much as we received. Like students of previous generations elsewhere we got up to all sorts of mischief. At the end of six months after the hazing process there was a large party where much alcohol was imbibed.

It is not my intention to describe all the episodes but a few need to be shared. A group of my fellow first year students purloined in the middle of one night a large supposedly heavy, metal statue, but actually made of fiberglass, of a mermaid from a garden in Llundudno, a beautiful beach suburb of Cape Town and placed the statue in the quadrangle of the residence. The newspapers of Cape Town had the story on the front page – the disappearance of the statue was a local landmark. The owners were amazed at how such a "heavy statue" had been transported away and why it had been taken. The newspapers were able to get two stories for the price of one, because two months later the statue mysteriously was returned in its original place.

Sandy Shaw, the British singer, visited the University and was kidnapped from the campus by a well-planned operation. She was quite apprehensive when she was taken to the quadrangle of the residence but was quite relieved when she saw wet concrete waiting for her hand and footprints. She accepted the episode well and saw the humor behind the kidnap.

A lot of Bridge was played, often to the early hours of the morning. On one occasion North and South were dealt all the black cards and East and West the red cards. I believe six no trump was called. The newspaper was notified of the card deal and published the odds stating that the chances of it happening were about 1 in a trillion. Three days after the article was published a reader wrote a letter to the newspaper that went along these lines. ‘I read with interest the odds of the bridge hand that had occurred at College House. I am not surprised it happened at College House considering the number of Bridge hands played there. My son went to the University of Cape Town and stayed at College House. He became an excellent Bridge player but failed all his exams.’

A four-lane road separated by a raised concrete median about a foot high and a yard wide, ran outside the residence - Main Road. About a mile southward was the shopping area of Rondebosch and about a quarter mile northward was a traffic light and the shopping area of Mowbray. Adjacent to the traffic light was a police station. One of the traditions of the residence was to belong to KAC, which stood for kaal-assed club (Kaal - afrikaans slang for naked). There were strict rules that needed to be adhered to before joining this honorable club. One had to run completely naked before twelve midnight from the residence to the traffic lights and back facing oncoming traffic. This entailed running past the police station. The run needed to be performed in front of two witnesses. If one was able to join the club one was awarded a blue necktie with the letters KAC embroidered; if one was caught by the police, an honors necktie, a red one with the letters KAC embroidered, was awarded.

Most, if they were doing the run, did it while inebriated and tried to do it when there was thick fog. One night a student did KAC on a bicycle. As luck would have it a woman travelling in a car hit the bicycle but with not too much damage. The cyclist scampered back to the residence as quickly as possible and rapidly dressed. In the meantime, the woman who was driving the car had gone to the police station and complained. The police knew exactly where the culprit came from and rapidly drove through the gates of College House followed by the woman. She immediately recognized and pointed-out the now dressed culprit: "There he is. That's the one. I recognize him. I even saw the hairs on his arse!" The student’s escapade became folklore; we also wondered how the single woman was going to explain to her friends, possible husband and insurance company, how the accident happened. As far as we were concerned the culprit deserved something even better than a simple honors necktie.

There were about twenty students at College House who were from Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. They usually travelled to Cape Town twice a year by train. This was a four-day trip routed through Bechuanaland (now Botswana). As one can imagine this was a long and tedious trip. One year when the train stopped in Francistown the College House members did KAC by running around the train.

Academically, despite the distractions of College House, I did work hard. Our subjects the first year were Physics, Chemistry, Botany and Zoology. In the mornings we trudged uphill for about a mile to the campus where the mornings were spent at didactic lectures. We returned to the residence for lunch and then trudged back up the hill in the afternoon for the practical courses where we did experiments in chemistry and physics. In Zoology practical’s we dissected rats, frogs, dogfish and crayfish. The frog we dissected was a common South African frog, Xenopus laevus, This frog was famous worldwide as it was used for about thirty years, until the 1960’s, to diagnose pregnancy – a test devised by Hogben in the United Kingdom and by Hillel Sapeika and Zwarenstein in Cape Town at the same time[[1]](#footnote-1), in which urine from a suspected pregnant women was injected subcutaneously into the frog. If pregnant, within 6 -12 hours eggs were produced by the frog, and so the diagnosis was made. In Botany practical’s plants and mushrooms were dissected. I enjoyed physics and debated whether to change to a different career path but did not.

At the end of the year I was fortunate to pass the exams, but, as predicted by the Dean, a third, about seventy did not. Some were given the opportunity of supplemental exams.

1. SHAPIRO, H. A.; ZWARENSTEIN, H. A Rapid Test for Pregnancy on Xenopus lævis". *Nature*. 1934;**133**): 762.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)