



CROSS HALL
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Soccer
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Sorority
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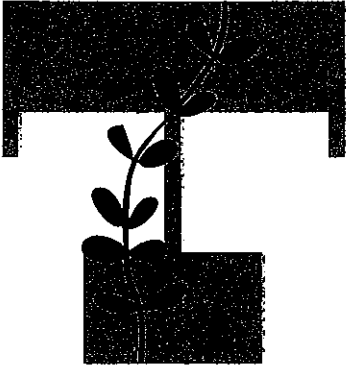
AOTI



THE OLDEST SISTER

Lessons abound when a professor becomes a student of sorority life.

Like many women at Rollins, I joined a sorority during my first year. In most ways, my experience in the Greek system has been typical: I have a "big," I participate in service projects and chapter events, and I attend all the crush parties and formals. The only difference between me and the rest of the members of my pledge class is that when I joined Alpha Omicron Pi (AOII) in the spring of 2011, I wasn't an 18-year-old freshman but a 30-something college professor.



HOSE AREN'T THE ONLY REASONS why I am the last person you would expect to find hanging out at a sorority house—I am also a soccer mom who embodies all of my genre's stereotypes: My purse is littered with candy wrappers and arcade tokens; I know the location of every McDonald's PlayPlace in the greater Orlando area; and, on school nights, I

am in bed by nine. As one of my former students wryly put it, my personal life is where fun goes to die.

While the unlikelihood of my sorority membership makes for a good chuckle, the irony of it is precisely why it works. When I roll into the sorority house in my snazziest pair of mom jeans, no one accuses me of trying to be 19 again. And when I ask what's up with the monogrammed pins, finger snapping, recruitment skits, and excessive use of glitter, everyone knows that I'm not pretending to be stupid—I really am that clueless. I did my undergraduate work at a university without a Greek system. The upside is that my ignorance of fraternity and sorority culture renders me completely nonthreatening. While I run the show in my classroom, I am clearly the student in the sorority house. Needless to say, this role reversal has given rise to circumstances that bear all the trappings of a television sitcom.

Of course, I didn't come to Rollins desiring to hone in on my students' extracurricular activities. My interest in sororities stemmed from an unexpected surge in one of the most primal of human emotions: jealousy. As a new assistant professor, the first thing I noticed about Rollins students was how much of their personal property was embossed with Greek letters. Fraternities and sororities are a big deal on campus, but I wondered what exactly about it is so appealing that it attracts a whopping 35 percent of the student body at Rollins—especially when 10 percent is the national average.

As a teacher of medieval British literature (a subject that doesn't exactly sell itself to the masses), I couldn't help but fantasize about a world in which 35 percent of the Rollins student body clamored to study *Beowulf* and Chaucer. After one particularly rocky class during which half of my students basically confessed that they would rather guzzle rat poison than read another poem written in Middle English, the horrible truth dawned on me: The problem wasn't with my students; it was with me. I couldn't expect my students to care about something that was important to me if I didn't show any interest in what mattered to them.

That's when I decided to become fraternity and sorority life's biggest faculty fan.

Unfortunately, I am pretty sure that is also how I introduced myself to the sorority member who I encountered in the basement

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of Olin Library one evening. The woman—who was using a laptop with an AOII sticker plastered across the front—did not see me coming until it was too late. Monica would tell me later that she found it slightly weird when I slid into the chair across the table from her and began asking her the same set of questions that one would pose to a spaceship full of aliens: Where did you come from? How many of you are there? What do you want?

Fortunately, Monica was able to overlook my lack of social grace. The two-hour conversation that followed culminated with an invitation to attend one of her sorority's upcoming chapter meetings. My attendance at that meeting—and several other chapter events in subsequent weeks—led to an invitation that took me by surprise. The Rollins chapter of AOII had solicited and received formal approval from their national headquarters to initiate me as an alumna member of their organization. Usually, these kinds of membership requests are processed by a local alumni chapter of the sorority, but since I was affiliated with Rollins and knew so many of its active collegiate members, I had been given special permission to join the chapter's current pledge class.

"Are you in?" she asked.

Once I stopped laughing, I realized that she was serious. As I weighed the choice before me, I found myself hovering between thinking "Why in the world would I do this?" and "Why not?" Ultimately, I was swayed to acceptance by a combination of burning curiosity and the faint hope that some of Rollins' undergraduate population would be inspired to step out of their academic comfort zones if they saw me orbiting so far outside of my own social universe.

"Despite what you think, joining a sorority is not all fun and games," Monica warned. I didn't know what she was talking about until the next morning, when she dropped a 3-inch binder on my desk.

"What's this?" I asked, casually flipping through the pages.

Monica explained that before any woman is eligible to join a sorority, she has to learn about the organization's history, values, and traditions. What she had given me was a study guide that would help me prepare for a sorority entrance exam.

At the mention of the word "exam," I grimaced. One of the things I have learned since becoming a professor is that I like administering exams significantly more than I like taking them. Monica, as it turned out, was not interested in my personal preferences or my excuses.

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“But I didn’t have time to study! I had a gazillion midterms to grade,” I whined after failing the pretest a few weeks later.

Monica rolled her eyes and slid the study guide across the table. “I can’t help you if you don’t help yourself,” she said smugly. The irony of saying that struck me as vaguely familiar. Later that evening, I remembered it was something that I say all the time to students who don’t put enough time and attention into my course assignments.

It’s slightly awkward, being schooled by a student.

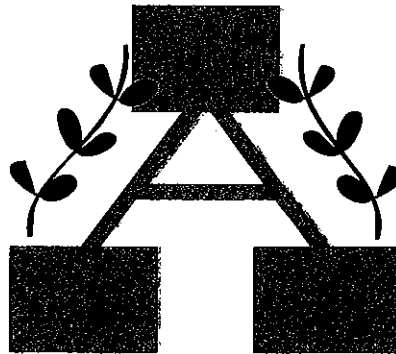
Sadly, it wasn’t the last time I dropped the ball. I was so worried about passing the exam (which I did, eventually) that I completely forgot that I needed a solid white dress for the initiation ceremony. What I pulled together (I’ll spare you the details, but in my defense, what mother of small children owns anything white?) was probably why Monica insisted on previewing my dress for the morning formal.

It is also why, after bringing my husband as my date/co-rapporteur, women started finding their way to my office when they needed to be reminded of the kind of romantic relationships they deserve. The college years are a wonderful, magical time when things begin to gel; but as we all know, before one’s life comes together, it usually falls apart. Having cultivated a trusting relationship with so many sorority women outside the classroom means that I can often help them muster the confidence necessary to ward off disaster before it strikes. These many inspiring—and sometimes heartbreaking—mentoring experiences have changed fundamentally the way I see my role as a teacher and serve as a poignant reminder that the most important work any of us will perform in our careers is often that which lies outside of our job descriptions.

An additional benefit of attracting so many people to my office is that they can’t help but see the inherent coolness of my collection of medieval artifacts. I’m thrilled to report that conversations about rat poison are on the decline.

One of the unexpected but happy gifts of joining a sorority is that it has provided me with a more nuanced perspective of my world. After going through the sorority initiation process, I now have a relevant vocabulary to assign to the relationship between Portia and Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*. Similarly, watching half a dozen women ditch their dates in order to spend their senior formal comforting a distraught sister in a hotel bathroom goes a long way in explaining why many medieval nunneries had extensive waiting lists.

I graduated from college at 19, was married at 20, and spawned half a basketball team before graduating from young adulthood. As a result, I will probably always be slightly traumatized by some of the things that fall under the rubric of the typical college experience. However, what has surprised me the most about the sorority experience is the strength of the bond between its sisters, a bond from which I naively assumed I would be excluded because of my age, my profession, and my personal history.



WEEK OR SO AFTER I passed the dreaded sorority test, I arrived on campus to find a mysterious basket outside my office door. Unsure if it was meant for me, I didn’t touch it for half a day.

When my curiosity became unmanageable, I brought the basket inside my office and lined up its contents on top of my desk. It was obviously a themed basket, but based on its contents—some 20,000 calories worth of edible goodies—it was hard to tell if the giver really liked me or wanted me dead. The answer came in the form of a sorority sister, who popped her head around my door. “It’s from your big,” she explained.

In sorority culture, family trees are formed by generations of veteran sorority members (“big sisters” or “bigs”) and new members (“little sisters” or “littles”). The role of bigs is to serve as stewards over new members and help shepherd them through the highs and lows of the collegiate experience. In their ideal form, a big is her little’s leader, mentor, teacher, counselor, ally, and most fierce and loyal advocate.

As I reflect upon my sorority family, my thoughts turn to my own daughter, who, at the age of 10, is bound up in that nasty strain of prepubescent drama in which one can never be pretty, smart, or cool enough. As I watch her struggle, I have thought more than once that what she needs is a sorority and, particularly, a big who will see her differences as strengths, not liabilities. Every woman, regardless of her age or position in life, needs a friend like that—one who will lift you as she climbs, one who will read you the riot act for not studying for the sorority entrance exam but then spend hours afterward tutoring you in the campus center.

Monica has done something more important than showing me the ropes of AOII; she has offered me her unconditional acceptance and support. There are not many people who would claim a middle-aged mom/college professor as her little, but Monica shows me off like a trophy. These kinds of acts of love lie at the heart of the sorority experience at Rollins.