

Our Coed & Dorm Big Deal

By Aaron Levin

Mizzou's first coeducational dormitory is only a semester old, but for the students, counselors and administrators involved in this experiment in living, it's been "no big deal."

Hatch Hall, formerly a men's dorm, and Schurz Hall, a women's dorm until this year, are joined by a dining hall to make up the Bingham Dormitory Group.

The residents of Hatch and Schurz Halls — 625 men and 551 women — have been distributed through the two buildings so that men and women occupy alternate floors. A major innovation at Mizzou, this type of coed housing actually is arriving rather late on Campus. The University is the last Big Eight school to have coed



housing. And many other institutions, including state universities in California and Michigan, are placing men and women in alternate wings on the same floor of a building and even in alternate rooms. Mizzou's system of alternate floors will be evaluated over the next several years to assess its impact and acceptance.

UMC students had been interested in the possibility of coed housing for years, but their ideas remained only that until the Independent Residence Hall Association (IRHA) became a strong organization and began backing the proposal. James Banning, vice chancellor for student affairs, believed that coed housing had important educational benefits and advocated it within the administration. After students drew up the petition proposal, they worked with Banning to solve the mechanical problems that might have slowed the implementation of the plan: questions of location, parking (men have more cars than women), cost for modifications (few were required at Bingham Group) and security. Surprisingly, there was some resistance by Hatch and Schurz residents who wanted to remain in the dorms in their same groupings. Their reluctance was overcome by arranging to keep whole floors of returning residents together.

A more casual dorm social life



The open house system lets residents meet outside the context of the weekend date. Marjorie Frazier drops by the room of Tony Custodio (left) and Dan O'Halloran for an evening of study and talk.

Now that it's here, how is coed housing working for the people most closely involved — the students living in the Bingham Group?

"Just great," says Lee Ann Lacy, a resident assistant (RA) who has lived in Schurz for four years. "I don't see any big differences, and most of the residents feel the same way."

Says freshman Vicki Feldman, "The situation here is more like real life. It's healthier for both the guys and girls."

What's healthier is that the coed program has meant an

overall improvement in the quality of dorm living, not only in the obviously increased opportunities for male and female students to meet. There is less vandalism and noise than in all-male dorms, more group activities, more dress-up dinners and a greater sense of community. Residents have a chance to structure the way they live.

Maintaining privacy was one of the first questions which concerned both students and parents, especially since there is a 24-hour open-house policy within Bingham Group (elsewhere, guests of the opposite sex must be out of the dorms by 11:30 p.m.). As a result, residents have to take responsibility for maintaining their own privacy. When traveling between their assigned rooms and baths, the women now, as a matter of course, throw on robes and the men pull on gym shorts.

And when the sound level rises high enough in Bingham Group to disturb those trying to study or sleep, it's up to the residents themselves to get things under control. Too often in men's dorms, according to RA Brent Mallinckrodt, annoyed students would just yell for quiet or kick at someone's door in frustration. Women, on the other hand, traditionally have been too timid to stand up for their rights in the dorm. Now both sexes are being encouraged to take positive steps to settle these kinds of problems. Men are learning to cope maturely instead of acting out their frustrations, and women are steadily getting more assertive about asking others, especially men, to keep down the noise on the floor.

"Another problem," says RA Nancy Robinson, "happens when one girl has her boyfriend in the room late, when her roommate wants to sleep. I try to get roommates to work out these kinds of problems themselves, and they seem to be doing that now instead of bringing them to me."

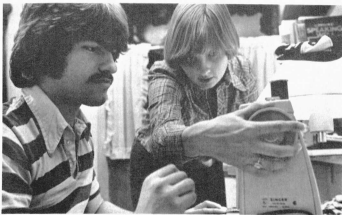
Male students, when grouped together in dorms, often tend to be rowdy. Perhaps one of the most dramatic advantages of coed housing is this: The presence of women seems to quiet the men. The result, says Diane Featherstone, head resident at Schurz Hall, has been less property damage and fewer yelling matches, food fights and false fire alarms.

Compared to last year, says Mallinckrodt, "the guys have more carpeting and drapery and generally keep their rooms neater. There's a lot less immature behavior like shoving or yelling or wrestling in the halls. Nobody wants to be known as a rowdy or slob."

"Women don't like it when men are horsing around," says Bingham head counselor Sylvia Johnston Riley, "but they've been hesitant to go up to them and tell them to stop. Now they are beginning to deal with things like this and interrelate in a more natural way."

Female RA's have been notably successful in controlling groups of rowdy males. One man calls this the "stun factor" — men are unaccustomed to female authority figures and seem a little surprised at the women's assertiveness in calming entire floors of noisy underclassmen.

There's help when you need it



In Bingham Group, men and women learn new skills from each other. Senior Lee Ann Lacy teaches freshman Gary Pennington the essentials of using the sewing machine so he can make his own draperies.

In fact, RA Joni Buesing thinks the men may actually accept discipline better. "They take authority more casually. When you ask them to quiet down, they do it and don't hold a grudge the next day. Women, on the other hand, seem to take discipline more personally — at least from a female RA."

The most successful part of Bingham Groups' experiment in coed living is the blossoming of friendships without sexual overtones between men and women.

Says Lyle Romine, a junior who has lived in Hatch for three years, "You don't have to ask a girl out to talk to her. When the floors are next to each other, it's a lot easier and more comfortable to meet a girl in the hall or the elevator."

"Social interaction isn't forced," says Hatch Hall head resident Jane Bennett, who is working on a master's degree in counseling. "The program here gives students the chance to informally meet the opposite sex — buying books, borrowing tools, meeting friends of friends. They can find common interests to talk about."

The phrase "brother-sister relationship" is heard repeatedly. After all, say many residents, most of them grew up in families which included brothers and sisters, so the idea of living in the same building with someone of the opposite sex is not particularly startling. "I feel more at home here than in Wolpers (an all-girls' dorm)," admits Becky Fisher, who has a brother at home. "Having the guys around is like being with your brother, except we don't fight."

This home tone has made possible a relaxed, informal social life throughout the dorm. Where in previous years men and women hardly spoke to each other in the cafeterias, now they mingle comfortably. A woman entering the cafeteria alone feels more relaxed about joining a group of

men for lunch without everyone assuming that she's after one of them. There's more coed talking in the dorm rooms, and mixed groups get together at night to study or watch Monday night football. Men help the women fix their cars or stereos, and women explain to the men why it is *not* a good idea to throw that brand new red shirt in the laundry with their white underwear.

In Bingham, the weekend date is losing some of its importance as residents adopt a more casual social life in the dorm. Male and female floors are paired up as "brother and sister" units to plan social activities. Previously, any social affair had to be a major production. This year, since the girls already know the guys, there's no difficulty in getting them to come to floor parties or other social events. In general, because of the coed plan, more activities are undertaken involving mixed groups or non-dating couples. And while a total reversal of roles is not yet at hand, women are even starting to take the initiative in asking men out for Campus movies or late-night pizzas.

And how do parents feel about their children living in the coeducational halls of Bingham Group? Whatever objections there were to the project came mostly in the planning stage, and there's been little negative feedback since the plan was placed in operation this fall. When head resident Jane Bennett gave a presentation on housing to incoming freshmen and their parents this summer, nearly 50 percent of her time was spent answering parents' questions about the coed dorm. Most parents seemed hesitant about allowing their offspring into Bingham Group, indicating concern about both privacy and security. But Bennett thinks their unvoiced concerns were really about sexual activity. It was rare, she says, to hear a parent support coed housing.

Now, most students claim their parents don't mind or at least have accepted the fact. One freshman woman, who obviously didn't want to be identified, says her father doesn't even know yet that she's living in a dorm with male students just a floor away. But sophomore Marjorie Frazier says, "My mother was curious but she didn't disagree with my choice to live in Hatch. She lets me make my own decisions."

"Coed housing," says head counselor Riley, "gives students a chance to meet people as individuals, learn skills of communication and gain the competence to interact with people. Maybe the increased informal relations with the opposite sex will keep some of them from jumping impulsively into marriage."

Clearly, this process of growth and the ensuing levels of maturity vary greatly among individuals. One unidentified male, obviously struggling to articulate his thoughts on friendship with women, demonstrated at the same time he hadn't the faintest idea about marriage. Quoted earlier in the year by the *Maneater*, he said: "You don't want to sleep with a girl you're going to see at breakfast the next morning and every meal after that." □