

PRESIDENT-IN-RESIDENCE

At the invitation of some undergraduates, Harold and Colene Brown made Dabney House their residence for the first two days of March. They moved into the resident associates' suite, while RA's John and Sandra Webb took up temporary refuge in the president's house on the east side of the campus. What happened during the Brown's two-day visit seemed far from what any of the participants had expected, though in retrospect they're glad they did it, as they reveal below.

A Different World by Colene Brown

Since the students didn't want to structure our visit, I arrived on the scene and had the uncomfortable feeling that they didn't quite know what to do with me. I was assigned to a very nice young man who took me to his classes the first morning. It was a cold, wet day—I had on warm, high boots, and he was barefooted. What a contrast! I almost wished I had left my boots behind.

I went to freshman math and chemistry, where I couldn't begin to understand the material. So I looked at the faces, amazed at how young some of them looked, and tried to imagine what it was like to try and understand what was going on. I wondered whether all of them did.

In the afternoon I went to a biology lab with two older fellows who are working under a grad student on measuring enzymes in the digestive system of a fly. They were full of interest and information on their project which they shared with me, and they showed me all the equipment involved. This was quite a different experience than attending the morning classes. I felt that these students really benefited from this part of Caltech. To me it seemed a relief—even fun—to work on a project with just one or two other people. They seemed so capable and interested in their experiment.

But the students forgot about the second day—what was going to happen to me! I had to ask around to get my day filled—but that didn't prove too difficult. Once I asked, I had more than enough classes to attend. The atmosphere in the house is a little bit creepy for an outsider, and the students don't always make it easy. You just sit around with them. But there I was . . . They invited me, so I thought, "I'm going to use this opportunity if I can."

At breakfast the fellows (who seemed to be different ones than I saw at dinner the night before) didn't even notice me. You just have to approach a table and take a seat next to some poor guy and say something to him. Then, chances are, he's very willing to talk with you. But it does make you feel like going off in a corner. I wonder if the fellows themselves really talk to each other?

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Honored Guests by the Men of Dabney

When you've never had the president and his wife as house guests, there's nothing to tie to in the way of protocol. We decided we wouldn't structure their visit at all, and now we think maybe this was a mistake. They didn't see as many house members as they possibly could have if we had brought some of them out of the walls. And we didn't think Mrs. Brown would be interested in seeing the whole house, but it turns out she would have been, and we wish she'd spoken up.

When the two days were over, some of us who had arranged the thing were a little let down, but in retrospect I think this is because the visit didn't coincide with our overblown fantasies—we had thought of Dr. Brown hanging around the lounge all afternoon playing bridge with the rest of the trolls. The biggest disappointment was the relatively little time Dr. Brown was able to spend in the house. And of course the first evening was pretty sticky. Everybody gave them—and especially him—the Honored Guest treatment. People who talked to him were pretty stiff. Others hovered around the outskirts, unsure how to approach the Great Man. It was like one of those damn sherry receptions. And of course everybody flattened against the wall when the Browns went in to dinner. You've got to admit that Dr. Brown in the role of Casual Dinner Partner was hard for any of us to take hold of. But things loosened up after dinner that Monday night, and later there must have been ten of us up in their apartment (they had the Webbs') and we talked for several hours. We got the impression that he really cares a lot about improving the Institute and is working hard at it. What we talked about mostly were ways it might be done, and how to take the teaching load off the physics people, and other changes in curriculum.

The Browns went to bed pretty early, and so they missed a lot of how a Caltech house really operates. To know it, you have to wander into a lounge at four in the morning—and maybe six fellows have just decided to go up to Mt. Wilson, the six consisting of three that want to go up there and three that don't want to but have cars.

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Colene Brown . . . *continued*

Well, there isn't much conversation at breakfast anyway. I guess everyone is too sleepy—me included.

I was interested in seeing if these kids wouldn't like to go to something with me. I really wanted to show them off outside the campus, but they weren't interested—mainly because they are too busy and, besides, they'd probably feel that they'd have to put on a tie and jacket.

But they did ask questions about our lives, like "What was it like living in Washington? I'll bet you went to a lot of parties," or "How does Dr. Brown feel about being president after a year here?" and "What does he do, really? What do you do?" But they don't seem to have much conception of what the answers might be. I really felt I was in a different world there, and I think this is what they probably feel themselves.

They missed the boat as far as showing me more. I was left to my own devices, and yet I didn't feel free to snoop around the house very much. I would have liked a tour of the steam tunnels and to have seen where they do their wash. And most of all I would have liked to have been invited in some of the rooms and just talked with the fellows.

They did volunteer some things on their own—the kinds of things that have to be done on the spur of the moment. I feel closer to them for having done that. Now, if I pass them on campus, I make a point of saying hello—even though they may try to look the other way. But, as in Dabney House, if I stop them and say something, they're glad to be recognized.

It was really quiet when we were in Dabney, which surprised me. I couldn't sleep the first night; I could hear various sounds, like kids coming in and playing the piano—and one broke a window. Of course, I think half of them were over at our pool. The second night the house was deadly quiet; I expect they were in our pool again!

We met a freshman who said he's leaving Caltech. It's not that he isn't making his grades—he said he just can't take the atmosphere. I got that feeling myself at being so confined.

I do have a much better understanding of how difficult it is to be a student; I lived through a bit of this myself when I was in college. But I couldn't begin to compare myself with the brightness of these kids; they're *so* good. They have the opportunity to make something of themselves and solve some of the problems of the universe. If anyone can do something, the Caltech student has the potential, and we were impressed with their concern for achieving the best they can.

It was a unique opportunity for these fellows to talk to my husband. They complained because they had only the two days, and only the evenings. But even his family is lucky to get that much time with him. And I know Harold felt the conversations with them will be very, very useful to him.



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Men of Dabney . . . *continued*

Although we appreciate the many demands on Dr. Brown's time, it would be interesting if they could live in the house for a week and possibly change their sleeping times from—say 8 a.m. to mid-afternoon.

Also, both nights, the Browns missed a swimming party over at their own house, where John and Sandy Webb were staying. The Browns, incidentally, had offered the Webbs and guests the use of the pool, which was, thoughtfully, heated. Those of us that went over there had never really thought much about where the president lived, before.

We were really impressed with all the energy Mrs. Brown had, and how much she entered into. In fact a couple of the fellows, who play a continuing game of classifying people as objects, saw her as a rotary bladed lawn mower. She is easy to talk to, and even the shy types had something to say, because she'd just waded in and start talking.

Everybody that spent any time with them was impressed with how easy they both were to talk to. And although Dr. Brown couldn't spend too much time in the house, still there was something positive and important in the mystique of having the president around—it would not have been nearly so good, in this respect, if he had just spent an evening.

Mrs. Brown went to classes with several of the fellows, and she looked like she got a lot out of it—the funniest experience was probably in Dino Morelli's class. He had sent word out that everybody better come that day because we'd all done badly on the last test, and he was really going to lay into us—and then here comes Mrs. Brown in and sits down. It blew his mind. He couldn't do anything he'd planned.

Having the president and his wife for even as short a visit as this one was well worthwhile, and we appreciated their obvious interest in student life. Although they only met about 20 of the 50 house members, still this is a pretty good proportion considering everything—because there are some who loiter, and are always in view—and others that some of the more sociable of us hardly ever see.



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