



Origins Of Ditching and Stacking

The first time seniors ditched their classes en masse and vanished from campus for a day was in 1921, a full century ago. It took another decade, however, before the tradition of Ditch Day really began to take shape, with seniors leaving behind complex, imaginative scavenger hunts, mazes, puzzles, and other challenges, known as “stacks,” carefully planned out to occupy the underclassmen and prevent them from wreaking havoc in the seniors’ rooms, a tradition that over the years has involved such high jinks as relocating the seniors’ possessions while they were gone or “redecorating” their rooms.

At first, “stacking” had quite a literal definition: the seniors would stack all the furniture in the center of the room in a tight configuration to thwart underclassmen’s pranks. This defensive maneuver expanded with time: seniors began filling their rooms from floor to ceiling and wall to wall with neatly nested wooden boxes, crumpled-up newspaper, water balloons, even rebar-fortified cement. The type of effort needed to deconstruct such arrangements caused them to be dubbed “Brute

Force” stacks. More intellectual ways of securing seniors’ rooms were soon employed as well. These included the use of sophisticated electronic, optical, chemical, or biological locks and puzzles, and became known as “Finesse” stacks. In the third variety, called “Honor” stacks, seniors left their doors unlocked, but underclassmen were honor bound to solve a thorny problem before entering.

Stacks have continued to evolve over the decades, most recently into complex puzzles that can combine elements of all three types. Today’s stacks typically have themes inspired by books, video games,



TV shows, or movies, and underclassmen team up—often clothed in T-shirts bearing the name of their chosen stack—to solve them.

Due to the pandemic, 2021’s Ditch Day, held on May 21, was, like the one in 2020, a virtual event. Themes for the 18 stacks included Indiana Jones, Time Travel, Alice in Wonderland, and Guardians of the Galaxy. Team members were asked to solve online puzzles, create maps, participate in virtual escape rooms and role-playing games, make paper airplanes, and collaborate on art activities. Mini contests within the larger stacks included a breakfast dinner party competition, a Halloween costume contest, and an outdoor scavenger hunt (with selfies as proof of found objects).

“Ditch Day 2021 went very well!” says senior class co-president Alessandra Mondello (BS ’21). “It was so humbling to see the ingenuity and creativity of my classmates, especially in a virtual setting. As seniors, we felt that we owed it to the underclassmen, especially the first years, to give them a taste of what Caltech is really like. I am proud to say that Ditch Day was able to accomplish this and more, bringing many students together in a potentially isolating time.”

– Judy Hill



Ditch Day scenes from (clockwise from top) 2006, 1985, 1965, and 2019.