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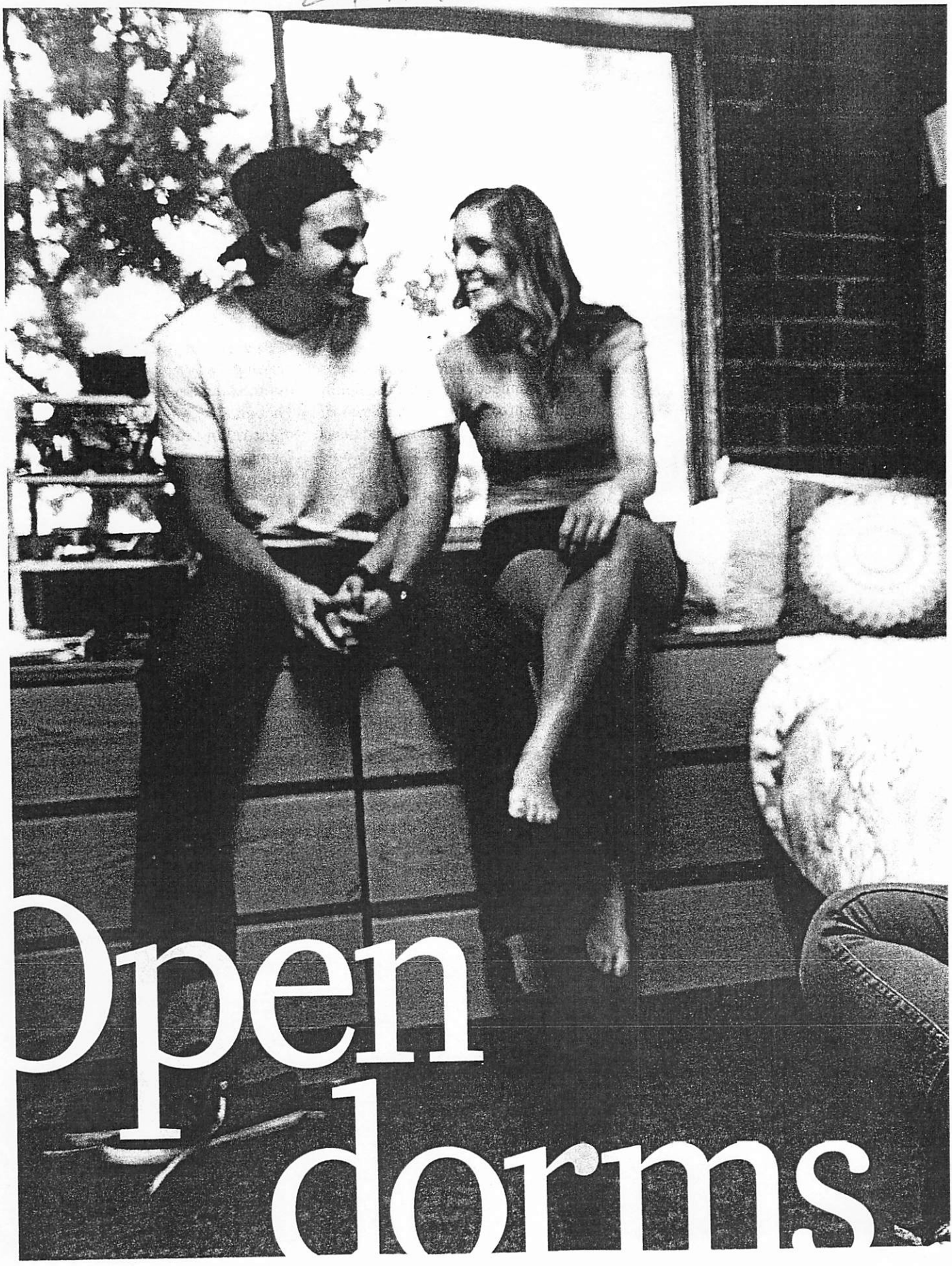
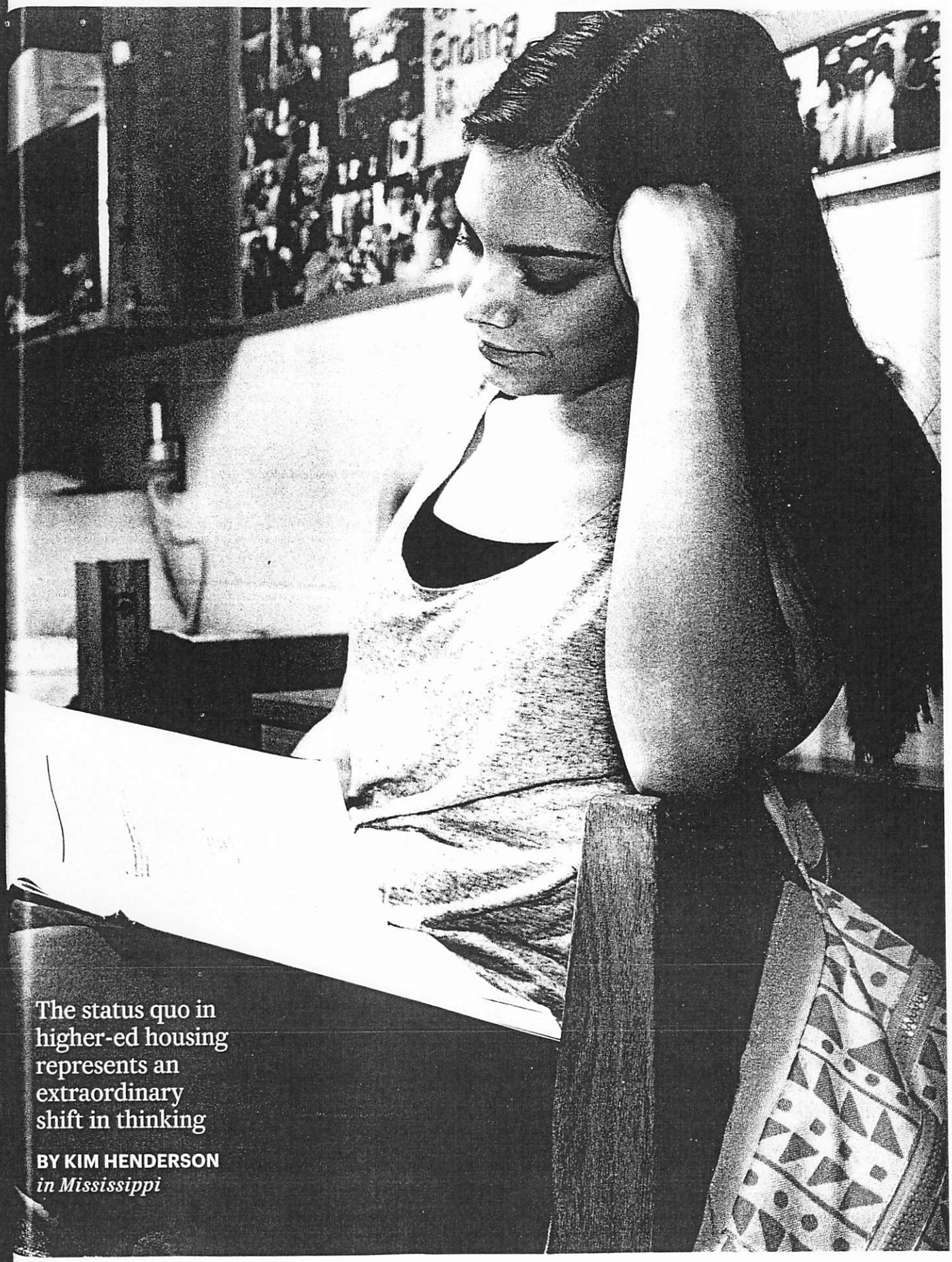


Open dorms



The status quo in higher-ed housing represents an extraordinary shift in thinking

BY KIM HENDERSON
in Mississippi

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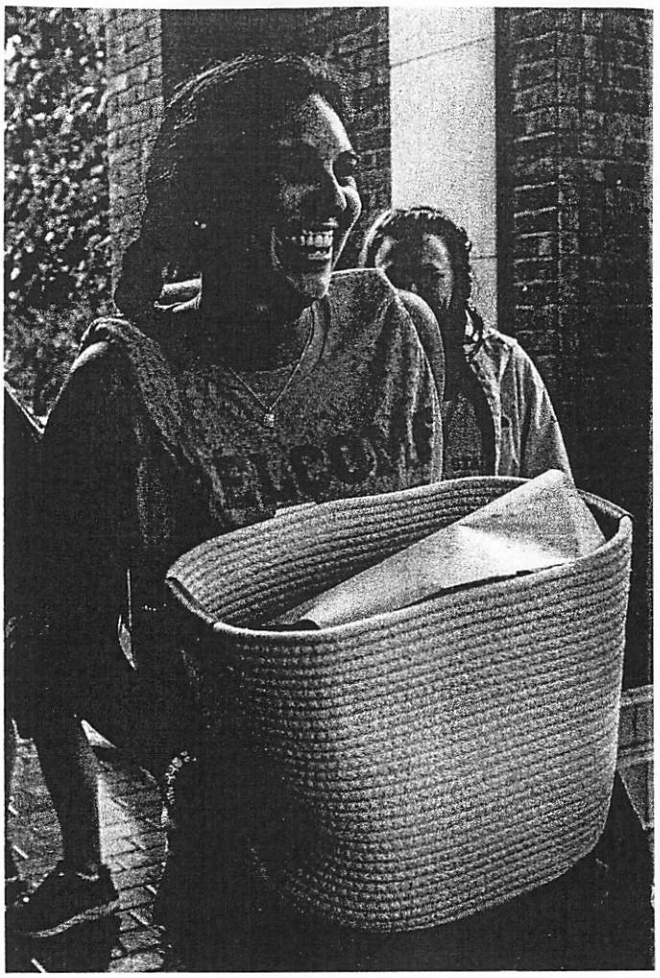


EACH FALL, EAGER 18-YEAR-OLDS lug twin sheets and towels into Oak Hall, a four-story dormitory hemmed in by manicured sidewalks and a century of tradition at Mississippi State University (MSU) in Starkville, Miss. A few semesters ago, Natalie (name changed) was one of those entering freshmen. With expectations as high as the 10-foot ceilings in her new room, she learned the finer points of microwave cooking and where to sign up for intramurals. She also settled in with an assigned roommate with whom she shared space but little else.

Natalie remembers an initial good start, followed by tensions related to their very different belief systems. "She constantly had boys in our room, and I didn't know any of them. Sometimes they would spend the night with her."

Spending the night is against the rules at MSU, where visitation hours for guests of the opposite gender run 10 a.m. to 2 a.m., but most students are unwilling to report violations because they fear being ostracized. Within weeks of moving in, though, Natalie was considering her options. Talk to a resident advisor? Request a new roommate? She'd come to dread opening the door to her room, because she never knew what she would find. The tipping point came when she walked in on an

Students move into Oak Hall at MSU.

illicit recording session involving her roommate, two guys, and an iPhone. "It was the final straw. I never went back in that room until she moved out."

Even now, as a senior, Natalie doesn't like to talk about that chapter of her college experience. She doesn't want trouble with the school or her old roommate, and when she heard about a group in her state questioning visitation policies at its universities, she was interested but hesitated to make contact. Eventually, however, she wrote to them. Others did, too.

But with co-ed living the norm on most campuses across the country, it may take more than stories to stir public interest. It may take coupling them with consequences that are increasingly hard to ignore.

POISED AND POSTURED on the edge of a custom sofa in her Jackson, Miss., condominium, Nancy Barrett is making her case. Balancing a stack of handwritten notes on one knee, a cup of her mother's fine china on the other, she stops midsentence. Did she contact the lieutenant governor before or after she spoke with the chancellor of Ole Miss?

"They were sympathetic but offered no path forward," Barrett says, adding that she also sent hand-delivered letters to Mississippi's Institutions of Higher Learning trustees. Same response. But as head of Safe Dormitories Association, Barrett is used to hurdles in the drive to eliminate opposite gender visitation in residential housing at state universities. What she can't get used to are stories like Natalie's.

"One school official told me the reason for rejecting our proposal was that students were on their phones too much. He said open visitation can help them to 'socialize,'" she said, eyebrows raised at the argument. "Is that what they call it now? Everybody knows nothing good comes out of boys being in girls' bedrooms, and that's what a dorm room is. A dorm room is a bedroom."

At 75, Barrett is an unlikely activist. She's more comfortable playing a supportive role to her trial lawyer husband than emailing newspaper editors. But four years ago Barrett learned a friend's daughter was sleeping on the floor of her dorm's laundry room because her roommate's date was there for the night. It was exam

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY

Nancy Barrett (right) meets with Janie Harris, a board member of Safe Dormitories Association.

week, and the young woman couldn't dress, sleep, or study in her own quarters. The situation disturbed Barrett enough to get her involved, starting with her alma mater, the University of Mississippi, which has told her, in effect, the school has no intention of revoking opposite-gender visitation in its dorms.

Barrett says the issue isn't just about personal convictions, though. It's about protection. "This generation doesn't understand what the problem is, but it is a very serious problem. Many young people will make decisions in those dorms that will have consequences they'll carry for the rest of their lives. It can negatively affect their education and possibly their marriages, and the schools' administrations will be complicit."

Five generations of Barrett's family have studied at Ole Miss, but that didn't keep her grassroots group from criticizing the visitation policies of that university and all the other state schools in full-page ads placed in the state's largest newspaper.

"A student housing official at Ole Miss told me curfews ended in 1974, and that's when the visitation started, as if it's a done deal," she explains. "I just say that's a long time to have a bad policy."

If Barrett seeks a more complete chronology, she'll find the winds of changing perceptions initially blew in from the west. The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) first offered co-ed living arrangements when its still-standing Dyskstra Hall opened three of 10 floors to women in the early 1960s. That trailblazing soon sparked an article in *Life* magazine predicting the concept's educational strengths: "They [co-ed dorms] will be better just as co-ed classes are better—more stimulating, intellectually livelier."

A 1969 *Reader's Digest* piece added another layer, referring to co-ed living as a potential stabilizer, the kind that could positively affect residents' manners, noise levels, and inclination to destroy property. By 1971, the *Colby Echo*, the student newspaper at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, reported 76 percent of that school's undergraduates were willing to live in a dorm where rooms alternated according to sex.

Today, exclusively male and female dorm communities are scarce, even at private Christian colleges.

PHOTO BY KIM HENDERSON

While co-ed communal bathrooms remain a stretch on Christian campuses, shared buildings and floors aren't. Neither are extensive in-room visiting periods.

Sandy Hough is dean of Community Life at Biola University, a nationally ranked Christian school in the heart of Southern California. Only one dorm at Biola is gender specific, while the rest separate the sexes by floors, with common areas throughout. It's a design Hough supports: "This is where students live, but it's also rubbing shoulders with people you can have a Bible study with, go to the movies with, plan events with, and that's what we mean by community."

Some Biola students live on designated brother/sister floors, a strategy Hough says builds productive alliances. "We're constantly asking, 'How are we helping our students learn what it's like to be a good neighbor? And what does that look like in the context of who we are?'"

Across the country in Jackson, Tenn., the landscape at Union University looks different, and not just because a 2008 tornado wiped out 80 percent of the school's housing. When they rebuilt those residence halls, Union leadership made sure they were designed for men and women to have separate living accommodations. Completely separate.

"It's not that we don't want students to interact," explains Union President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver. "Obviously, students go to classes together and to the dining hall and those kinds of things, but we have what we think are appropriate boundaries."

Union's idea of appropriate boundaries may be firm on dorm designations, but it allows open visitation. Students are welcome inside the rooms of their opposite-gender friends until midnight on Fridays and Saturdays, and until 9 p.m. some other days of the week. Oliver says the policy aligns with Union's view of students as apprentice adults. "We want to help them learn to navigate these things in a way that is both honoring to Christ and also helps them learn to live well with others."

Elsewhere, Wheaton College and Covenant College take similar stands (students can stay until 11 p.m.), while Baylor University's visitors must take their leave by 1 a.m. every day of the week. At least two Christian schools have settled rules against any opposite-gender dorm room visitation—Patrick Henry College and Bob Jones University. Liberty University allows two-hour open dorm events a few times each semester.

POLICIES HAVE OUTCOMES, and Quinn McClellan, 44, has a better understanding of them after sending her daughter to live in a "traditional" female dorm at Mississippi State. As a result of Rice Hall's nontraditional open visitation, her daughter learned to be fully dressed before walking to communal bathrooms and showers, because guys were always hovering. Guys in boxers. Guys who had stayed overnight.

McClellan's family mantra—"it may be 2022 out there, but in our house it's 1950"—couldn't help her daughter in Starkville. By midterm, the freshman mentioned to her mom she'd seen a pregnancy test in the trash can in the bathroom on her floor. "Hearing that just broke my heart," McClellan, a widow, admits. "To think that somebody's 18-year-old daughter was taking a pregnancy test—probably the scariest moment of her life—in a public bathroom stall in a dorm." Her daughter spotted an empty Plan B (abortion pill) box in the trash as well.

Like many colleges across the nation, MSU has a freshman residency requirement that McClellan believes puts moms and dads in a tough spot, and not just those with daughters. "Christian parents probably preach to them over and over [about Biblical teachings regarding sex], then they throw them into this situation with so much temptation. What do you think is going to happen?"

But campus crime numbers may indicate promiscuity and pregnancy aren't the only problems associated with open dorms. McClellan didn't know it at the time, but MSU documented 34 rapes in its on-campus residence halls between 2016 and 2018, a time frame that includes her daughter's freshman year.

Such information is public because of the Clery Act, legislation resulting from the tragic 1986 rape and murder of Jeanne Clery inside her room in co-ed Stoughton Hall at Pennsylvania's Lehigh University. But even if prospective students and their parents can access campus crime numbers as they compare schools, skeptics say they may not see the full picture. Title IX litigation, as well as the acclaimed and criticized 2015 documentary, *The Hunting Ground*, has exposed the extremes that schools will go to in their desire to cover up sexual assault occurrences.

According to Andrea Curcio, conversations about college sexual assaults often ignore a basic fact—that the majority of them happen in dorm rooms. Curcio is a professor at Georgia State University College of Law who researched and wrote about the issue after it hit home.

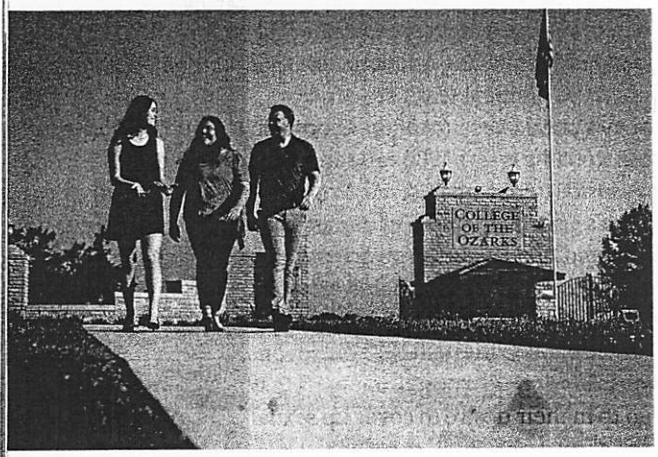
"My daughter was the quintessential victim. First year of college, living in the dorm, assaulted in her room. It changed her life trajectory, and not in a positive way," Curcio explains. "So my motivation for looking at this

> "Students don't know their dorm room can be dangerous, so give them knowledge as part of the whole training."

A defining directive

College of the Ozarks, a private Christian institution in Point Lookout, Mo., known as "Hard Work U," is challenging a directive from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that affects how religious schools manage their residential housing. The lawsuit, *College of the Ozarks v. Biden*, challenges the order, which would require colleges to modify their housing policies to allow biological men who identify as female to live in dormitories reserved exclusively for women.

Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) is representing the school, and its attorneys maintain the HUD directive contradicts the plain text of the Fair Housing Act, which confirms that "sex" means biological sex. The suit also argues that HUD violated procedural requirements by not allowing public notice and comment, and that the directive violates the constitutional right of College of the Ozarks and similar religious institutions to operate consistent with their religious beliefs.



Ryan Bangert, senior counsel at ADF, says College of the Ozarks chose to take action because dorm policies are at stake: "What this means for College of the Ozarks and colleges like it is they could no longer maintain a policy of separating students based on sex when it comes to housing. If students determine that they identify as a member of the opposite sex, the HUD interpretation would require the school to accommodate those students by giving them access to dormitories of the opposite sex."

Or face six-figure fines.

Senior Sawyer Nichols believes his school made the right decision to fight the order: "Law is established by tension—two sides pushing back and forth. If we hadn't filed suit, the Biden administration would continue to establish legal precedent without considering the traditional Christian values this country was built on." —*K.H.*

is really to stop other young women and families from having to go through all that we had to experience."

Existing regulations don't require schools to educate students about where most assaults occur, and Curcio says that's a problem. Undergrads will watch orientation videos about reporting assault and learn to guard their drinks and avoid strangers, but they may never see the data that indicates more than 70 percent of on-campus rapes occur in campus residence halls, and in 9 out of 10 cases, the perpetrators are people the victims know.

"Knowledge is power," says Curcio. "Students don't know their dorm room can be dangerous, so give them knowledge as part of the whole training. If we're going to reduce risk, it's important to know where to focus our efforts."

She acknowledges the need for more research—research comparing the different levels of assault that happen in co-ed dorms versus single-sex dorms, even athletic dorms. "I think it's worth looking at. It's probably also worth looking at whether kinds of visitation rules make a difference or not."

It was data that convinced the president of the Catholic University of America to make a drastic change on the school's 176-acre campus in downtown Washington, D.C. Through a 2011 article in *The Wall Street Journal*, John Garvey laid out his back-to-the-future plans to return their institution to single-sex dorms in a time when nearly 90 percent of college housing was co-ed.

With the *Journal of American College Health*'s findings to back him, Garvey pointed out students living in co-ed dorms were twice as likely to binge drink, and they were twice as likely to have had three or more sexual partners in the last year. The university president acknowledged the decision to reestablish single-sex dorms would be costly, but he believed Catholic U students "would be better off."

Ten years later and a thousand miles south, Nancy Barrett is making the same point, hoping the higher-ups in Mississippi's higher education and legislature will listen. The only difference is she says nothing is really required to fix this problem except a piece of paper taped to the door of each dorm.

"Just write 'there will be no opposite gender visitation in dorm rooms' on it," she smiles. "Simple. Less than $5 dollars per campus. This isn't an expensive fix. This is a mindset." ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF COLLEGE OF THE OZARKS