

2015

“In an old nave’s grime”: The Spencer Honors House

Rusty Rushton

University of Alabama, Birmingham

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcmonochap>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

Rushton, Rusty, ““In an old nave’s grime”: The Spencer Honors House” (2015). *Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series*. 22.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcmonochap/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

CHAPTER 9

“In an old nave’s grime”:
The Spencer Honors House

RUSTY RUSHTON

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

In an old nave’s grime,
a mess of weeds has sprouted
sweeter than flowers.

The University Honors Program (UHP) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), its 200 or so students, and its four full-time staff members (Director, Associate Director, Program Coordinator, and Program Manager), all have the good fortune to call home a beautiful old church on the south side of UAB and Birmingham. The Spencer Honors House is where the UHP holds its classes and conducts its business and where the program’s students convene for the myriad reasons honors students convene: committee meetings, late-night study sessions, general recreation especially of the pool and ping pong sort, hanging out, or spending private time by themselves. Its old-world ambiance lingers, countered by

remnants of its original graffiti wall, recast every so often by new students with new complaints or new drawing skills that fuel the dynamism of the environment. Its couches and computer rooms, its card-access and kitchen provide night owls with all they need for last-minute test preps or further procrastination. How this glorious domicile came to be, or rather how it came to belong to the honors program, is a story already and best articulated by the program's founding and now retired director, Dr. Ada Long. Long provided the following genesis story of the UAB Spencer Honors House a few years ago for an event celebrating its benefactors Bill and Virginia Spencer:

When I was first appointed honors director in 1982, Tom Hearn, UAB's Vice President of Academic Affairs, showed me with great pride a small duplex on 15th Street for our soon-to-be digs. It was one of the handful of actually old buildings on campus and the only one that had been a private house in the residential neighborhood UAB had razed to the ground when starting to expand its campus in the 1960s and 70s. We had only 33 students in the program that first year along with a half-time secretary and four teachers in the interdisciplinary course. The duplex worked for us, though the next year we would have had to teach the interdisciplinary course in some other location to accommodate a second influx of students.

The program's administrative assistant (Debra Strother) and I wandered all over campus, looking for a place to call the Honors House. The pickings were slim, but we looked longingly at another of the older buildings at least potentially up for grabs—a formerly Presbyterian and then Baptist church—at the western edge of campus. It had been used for several years as the ballet house and then had been ceded to the student government association. But the SGA had found new quarters and was moving out, so the house would be vacant. Rumor had it that this glorious Richardsonian Romanesque building might be torn down.

The students and Debra and I wrote a letter to the VPAA (I think Tom had left UAB and Jim Woodward had taken his place), which all of us signed, begging for the house. Our promise was that we would fix up and furnish the inside of the church if the university would provide its electricity and enough external repairs to keep it standing. Those were definitely the good old days. Our request was granted with no mention of liability(!) and with only one condition—that the art department, which was already occupying about a third of the building’s basement, would stay where it was.

During the summer months of 1984, all the first- and second-year honors students and a few of our faculty worked nonstop getting the place ready for fall. We dug old couches out of garbage bins. We found a hundred old-timey school desks in the UAB storehouse. We donated our own tables and chairs. One student donated a pool table. We stripped paint from old mantle pieces and original wood paneling. We painted and painted and painted. One of our incoming students was a house painter by profession who built us a huge scaffold from floor to ceiling—which meant 40 feet or so high—for the purpose. My scariest moment as honors director was hearing a loud bang as one side of the scaffolding fell with two students on the very top of it. They managed to hang on and scramble down: a good omen for the program.

Two days before classes started, we had finished enough of the repairs to make the building usable, an achievement we all celebrated by writing our names on one of the downstairs walls. Thus began the graffiti wall that soon snaked its way through most of the bottom floor save the kitchen, at the entrance to which we wrote: “Abandon graffiti, all ye who enter here.”

Our new honors house was never quite clean and never entirely lovely, but it was our clubhouse, really, in which

we had all invested time, sweat, and our home furnishings. Everything honors took place there, from classes to parties (we had a lot of those) to service activities to advising to administration to, on many more than one occasion, temporary and not-so-temporary housing.

But eventually there were problems: the building was crumbling; we had a major termite invasion upstairs; and our relations were often strained with the art department, who were less than amused by our 24/7 antics in the building. Most critically, though, we had no wheelchair access.

The lack of wheelchair access—combined with an institution-wide capital campaign—gave rise to the hope of finding funds for a full renovation of the building. Starting in about 1997, the honors program became an official part of the UAB campaign with a request initially for a million and then for two million dollars. President Claude Bennett, a loyal friend to the program (as all the previous UAB presidents had been), and the university's development director Shirley Salloway Kahn started arranging for meetings between me and various potential donors. I found the experience disheartening. None of the men I spoke to could fathom the idea of an honors program that embraced not only interdisciplinary studies, social service, and a strong sense of community, but also every kind of social diversity. They seemed to think of honors as something only for affluent kids from “over the mountain,” and in my view they just didn't get it. Also, I became increasingly aware that any funding we might receive from such donors would come with strings attached. These were men who wished to change the direction of the program. I was starting to feel queasy about the whole venture.

Then one day in January of 1998, Claude Bennett asked me to have lunch with Bill Spencer at Birmingham's *The Club*, a venue overlooking the city employed for serious

potential-donor relations. I did not look forward to this lunch. Much to my surprise and delight, however, Bill and I clicked immediately. He got what the others had missed and then some. His first wife (he was a widower who had since remarried) had been the legendary headmistress of a private school in Birmingham and one who had insisted, as I did for the honors program, that all student applicants be interviewed and that diversity always be an important aim of admissions.

After lunch, Bill came over to the Honors House in its then current state for a visit. He got a big kick out of the place—its general spirit, its graffiti, the myriad ways we had made it serve our needs—while at the same time recognizing its decrepitude. When it became clear that he was at least considering what he might do to help us out, I mentioned that we really needed the art department to be . . . somewhere else, the goal of which would become his *cause célèbre*, so to speak, within the more general cause of restoration and eventually would be made a condition of his two-million-dollar gift in 2000. Before any of which, however, he elected to sponsor five two-thousand-dollar scholarships for precisely the kinds of students our prior potential donors had felt did not belong in the honors program. Our Spencer scholars over the years have come from Ghana and Russia and rural Alabama and Mountain Brook. They have been valedictorians or they have been homeless or they have already completed distinguished careers. They are athletes or they are eggheads; they are poets; they are mothers, and they are grandmothers. And they’ve all found connections with each other, as they have also with faculty—hundreds of whom have taught in the honors program since its beginning—and administrators. Bill and I became and remained great friends until his death in 2009, and I miss him with all my heart.

In *Beowulf*, the great Anglo-Saxon epic, Heorot Hall is the center of all human connections for the Danes; it is what makes human connections possible. It is a physical place, but it is also the symbol of a community. Its beauty is the exact equivalent as well as embodiment of the vigor and beauty and goodness of its people. UHP's Heorot is the Spencer Honors House, and the givers of it were true benefactors in the original meaning of the word: they were doers and makers of goodness.

HONORS HAIKU

All they have of love
and lack of love they're bringing
to the broken church.

Science saunters by—
a glittering tumbleweed
headphoned to the spheres.

Brains from far boroughs,
basting in a marinade
of smoke and laughter.

Up here where I am,
that crypt of rude graffiti
smells pretty damn fine.

A mix of punches,
spirits, flooding the mind's bowl—
Dail ale; Ada ade.

The gone god looks back,
stumped to see such soul in bloom
so close to the ground.