The Grinnell Open Dorms Incident, 1968

I still have vivid memories of my involvement in the open dorms incident in the fall of 1968, while I was a junior at Grinnell. I cannot remember any time in my life when my person was the center of so much controversy. In retrospect I don't regret anything I did. Let me try to recount the history of that affair, with some help from old issues of two Grinnell newspapers—The Scarlet and Black (S & B) and the alternative paper I had founded, The Pterodactyl. In the midst of this narrative I will recount some of my own feelings as I remember them and several incidents that were not generally known.

The rule then existing that students of the opposite sex could only visit in each other's rooms between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. on Sundays had become obnoxious to Sixties students. In 1966, the year I became a freshman, twenty students had a sleep-in to protest the rules, an incident that was reported in The New York Times. Three students were suspended, and the rule remained. Hypocrisy was then the prevailing norm. We were told by upper classmen that one could safely ignore the rule, as long one was "discreet." How widespread was this? An S & B poll in 1968 revealed that of 130 respondents 75 percent had engaged in illegal visitations, known popularly as IVs. I can still remember during my freshman year having to take part in an embarrassing "panty raid" in which male students in our dorm made an arranged visit to a girl's dorm on the south side of campus. While we waited in acute embarrassment below, several willing girls—then known as "co-eds"—threw their panties out of the window into our waiting arms.

But this was the heyday of the sexual revolution. Contrary to common belief the sexual revolution was not about having more sex, though that did occur because of the widespread use of "The Pill," which made intercourse virtually risk-free for women. The sexual revolution was about taking sexuality out of the shadow, discussing it openly, and accepting practices that hitherto been deemed either immoral or unseemly. During the sexual revolution Americans widely accepted the legitimacy of women's full claim to sexual pleasure, sex before marriage, oral sex, masturbation, many aspects of pornography, and homosexuality. Challenging the hypocrisy that college students should pay lip service to college regulations intended to prevent sexual relations, when those regulations were being widely flouted and winked at by all involved, was part of that revolution.

The incident was also part of the student movement of the Sixties that arose from the civil rights and antiwar movements. Both movements were greatly inspired by radical pacifism, which embraced nonviolence as a way of life and advocated non-violent civil disobedience as a way of bringing issues like the oppression of African-Americans and the killing of thousands of innocent Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War into the limelight of public opinion, where it could be discussed frankly and openly. The student sit-ins and freedom rides by black students in the South and the draft resistance movement of Northern white students were part of that movement. So were the 1966 sleep-in at Grinnell and my actions in 1968.

My own activism dated to 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson sent combat troops to Vietnam. I tried to get our high school paper to run a debate over

the issue. When the administration refused, I started a free speech movement based on my sketchy knowledge of the Berkeley Free Speech movement, which I had read about in the fall of 1964. When I came to Grinnell I met a remarkable group of students, prominent among them, Eric Thor, Joe Berry, Bonnie Tinker, Ron Steinhorn, Bruce Nissen, Phyllis Murray, Mary "Molly" Malcolm, Debbie Friedman, Diana Burrows, Andy Loewi, Sue Levine, Dick Camp, Nina Shapiro, Dave Skinner, Don Hecker and a host of others too numerous to mention, who felt much as I did. In the fall of 1967, during my sophomore year, sixty of us founded the Grinnell Student Movement at a local coffee house we had rented. The main issue for the movement was "open dorms." I also spearheaded the founding of what would become an underground (the term today would be "alternative") newspaper, The Paper, whose name would soon be changed to Pterodactyl. I felt a strong sense of injustice when the faculty advisor at Grinnell denied me the editorship of the S & B, which I felt I deserved after serving the previous year as its Associate Editor.

In the fall of 1967, many of the same circle founded a Grinnell chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society on campus, and that group became the prime mover of the open dorm actions that year. Our adversary in the affair was college president Glenn Leggett, referred to humorously in Pterodactyl as "Don Leggetti de la Grinnella, the Knight of In Loco Parentis." Though Leggett was an honest and decent man, his determination to hold to *In Loco Parentis* (meaning literally "in place of parents," NOT crazy parents) as the core principle justifying strict dorms regulations, kept his administration from compromising an issue that had thrown the authority of the college into disrepute among students.

During the spring semester of 1968, the long simmering issue was intensified by the stated determination of Dean of Students, Alice Low, to crackdown on IVs. Student Senator Bonnie Tinker, who as a high school student had been the central figure in a US Supreme Court case that upheld the right of students to freedom of speech, responded, "I think we're working from two different premises . . . A majority of the students here feel that the rule is detrimental to their mental health. They're overthrowing that rule. "

During the summer of 1968, I was on the streets at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—a "police riot" as the Walker Report later termed it. I and other Grinnell activists returned to campus that fall radicalized. That semester our SDS chapter engaged in a variety of actions to draw a connection between campus and national issues, to draw students out of their insularity living in a campus isolated in the midst of Iowa's cornfields. We used a host of innovative counter-cultural methods that would grab attention and gently mock authority.

Instead of holding one more demonstration to protest the war, we staged a flag football game between SDS and Air Force ROTC, which was witnessed by hundreds of students in the school's practice football field (SDS won, 7-6). That semester, ten SDS women held a "nude-in" protesting Playboy's recruitment on campus, even while we were trying to get AFROTC removed from it. The nude-in occurred shortly after the more well-known women's liberation action protesting the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, and was one of the first such actions in the nation.

SDS also supported a campus (SAGA) food workers' strike by joining their picket line and by making a mess in the cafeteria to put pressure on the six workers who had refused to honor the strike. When anti-strike students tried to stop us, a raucous food fight ensued, which worsened the mess. More outrageously, an SDS male member parodied homecoming pageantry by running for homecoming queen. Incredibly, he won the ballot of male students. When the school refused to crown him, we crashed the half-time ceremonies by driving a car with him in a prom dress in the back seat around the track surrounding the football field.

But none of these events drew as much student support and involved the college in as much controversy as the open dorms incident. That semester the college had "integrated" the men's and women's dorms—previously segregated into two sides of campus, but had retained the rules against visitations. On September 26, I invited my girlfriend, then living with her parents in San Francisco, to visit me. Not having the funds to put her up in a motel, I had her sleep in my dorm room in Loose (you can imagine the jokes) Hall. I had no intention of sparking an incident; it was not staged as our opponents at the time charged. She stayed there four days, from Thursday through Sunday, when she left to return home.

One morning after I had left the room to go to class, a building worker unlocked the door to clean the room and found her sleeping. The worker reported the incident to the administration, and Dean Low asked the Resident Advisor to tell the hall president, Grant Crandall, a good friend of mine, to ask the young woman to leave the dorm. In other words, the policy of sweeping the issue under the rug was to continue. I told Grant that I did not accept the legitimacy of the administration

regulating the personal lives of students, and I would not ask my girlfriend to leave. I was engaging in an act of civil disobedience intended to bring the issue before the campus community.

At that point, the RA referred the issue to the student Judicial Council. In response I asked for a public hearing. On October 2, the student Senate passed a resolution of support stating that the rule should be eliminated, that 24-hour visitation should be permitted, and that I should not be punished.

Then came an incident that remains vivid in my mind to this day. President Leggett asked me to meet with him in his office. When I did, he asked me to sit on the couch while he expounded on the need of the college to maintain its good image with the public. I can't remember his specific words, but I do remember him sitting down next to me, putting his arm around my shoulder in a fatherly way, and asking me to keep the incident quiet. I turned and looked at him, my face no more than a foot away from his and told him, "no." His faced turned beet red. I could actually see the color change before my eyes. From then on, the die was cast.

My hearing before the Judicial Council turned into a public trial. The Dean of the College, Eugene Thompson, acted as prosecuting attorney, and two of my fellow SDSers, Bonnie Tinker and Michael Brandon (who wrote the "Marlo's Musings" column in Pterodactyl), were my defense attorneys. Several hundred students jammed into the South Lounge of The Forum to hear the case. While I was the one on trial, our goal was to put the rule itself on trial before the student body. At the end of the trial Bonnie asked students to raise their hands if they thought the dorm rule was obsolete, and a majority did so.

On October 23 I was found guilty, but the Council was split on the appropriate punishment, leaving the decision to President Leggett. Leggett then decreed that I was to vacate my residence hall on November 11 and thereafter live off campus. (I moved into the home of Henry Wilhelm and Krys Neuman.) Fellow students thought the punishment was a farce since many of them desired to live off campus, but were prevented from doing so by college rules. Some said half-seriously that they would turn themselves in voluntarily so they too could live off campus.

During this time the issue could not be confined to campus. The New York Times sent a reporter to campus to interview me, but did not print the story. The Chicago newspapers did, with the Tribune running a front page story on October 31 headlined: “”Student’s Roommate Is a Girl: He’s Ousted from Dormitory.” My mother, who then taught in the Chicago public schools, told me she was profoundly embarrassed among her fellow teachers. Her son was part of a sexual revolution that was not widely shared by those over thirty! I can also remember vividly being woken up in the middle of the night by an obscene phone call from a Grinnell alumnus.

The open dorms issue had a happy ending—most would agree. In November, student government held a referendum on the issue: almost all the students voting supported a version of visitation rights, which denied college authority. Shortly thereafter, President Leggett granted 84 hours a week of dorm visitation and relinquished the key principle of in loco parentis. Once that happened, students went beyond Leggett’s guidelines and established “home rule” in which visitation hours were established by each dorm.

As for me, I flunked out of Grinnell at the end of the semester. I had spent so much of my time organizing and reading leftwing texts and journal articles in the library—from Marx to Mao—that I neglected to attend my classes. My local draft board reclassified me I-A. Even though I enrolled the following semester at the University of Illinois in Chicago, I expected to be drafted into the Army and sent to Vietnam. Fortunately, the draft lottery intervened. I received a high lottery number such that my birth date cohort wasn't drafted and thus escaped the Vietnam experience.

As for the girl who so fatefully slept with me in my dorm room that September, she became my wife in 1970. Silvia and I have two children, now grown and successful. Since 1989 I have been a professor of history at Indiana State University. I remain a committed activist through my work in the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

Richard Schneirov '70