Message from Ashdown Housemasters

by Ann & Terry Orlando

Ashdown House had a very successful move from the oldest building on campus (W1) to the newest (NW35). MIT Housing staff were very well organized and helpful; a move of 200 people over three days could not have gone more smoothly. In finest Ashdown tradition, no sooner were we moved than we started celebrating. There was a very successful Thirsty Ear BBQ (yes, the Thirsty Ear moved and has a new home in the new Ashdown). The annual Fall Seminar Institute Picnic was held at Ashdown this year, with over 4,000 people attending. Both courtyards were packed, it was a beautiful day and it was a great way to introduce the new Ashdown House to the entire MIT community.

The culture of the old Ashdown has been successfully transferred, due to the diligent efforts of this year’s AHEC. We continue to have AHEC meetings on Thursday evenings in the new Crafts Lounge, followed by Coffee Hour in the new Hulsizer Room. Ashdown hosted a very popular dance party during orientation, followed by an equally popular Halloween party open to all graduate students. Monthly Sunday brunches are continuing as are Housemaster Dinners, floor events and cultural activities. All of these activities are supported by an enthusiastic group of officers. Four of these officers were recognized with Avery Ashdown Awards at our Thanksgiving celebration.

There is one very new feature at Ashdown House now: a group of 50 undergraduates and their Housemasters, Prof. Suzanne Flynn and Mr. Jack Carroll, are living with us. The undergraduate group, known as Phoenix, is a community within our community. They will be with us until the renovations in W1 are completed. In the meantime, both communities are getting along well together. To support mutual interests, a graduate-undergraduate mentor program was established this Fall.

Finally, in a ‘back to the future’ sense, Ashdown House once again has a dining program. After a hiatus of over 40 years, there is now a nightly dining service in the Hulsizer Room opened to all graduate students, as well as the Ashdown undergraduates. The dining program so far has been quite popular and we are excited to have this addition to Ashdown community life.

We hope that our alumni will continue to take an interest in Ashdown House. Last year’s Spring Ashdown Alumni event was very successful. Those who attended were given tours of the then under construction NW35 was. We expect to organize another Ashdown Alumni event in 2009 so that you have an opportunity to see the finished product. However, anytime you get an opportunity to visit, please feel free to drop by for dinner in the Hulsizer Room, a drink in the Thirsty, or just to walk around our new home.
Ashdown House: Our Community Lives On

by Archana Venkataraman

I was a resident in the old Ashdown building for two years, and those were, by far, the most rewarding times of my life at MIT. The community was warm and welcoming. I met new people every week at coffee hour and learned about different cultures from around the world. The building was also exceptional. It was full of life and history, which only added to the general atmosphere of Ashdown House. I was amazed at how committed graduate students were in maintaining this rich social environment, despite their crazy schedules and research frustrations. It was their infectious enthusiasm that prompted my decision to join AHEC and to play an active role in ensuring that our traditions and cultures endure.

As you know, in 2006 the administration announced plans for a graduate new building. In August 2008, the new Ashdown House opened at 235 Albany Street, officially building NW35 on the MIT campus map. Granted, some things are very different here. Our new residence is much more modern. The large windows, contemporary architecture and brightly-colored walls are a stark contrast to the beautiful arched ceiling and decorative columns in the lobby of W1. The layout of rooms has changed as well. Although we have a few W1-type suites, the majority of residents now live in fully-furnished apartments, complete with kitchens and living areas.

Despite these inevitable changes, AHEC fought to retain key features of W1, which had been integral in knitting together the Ashdown community. For example, we have a common kitchen on all but one floor. Even in these short months, the kitchens have become small centers of social and community life. Many residents regularly gather here to cook and eat together. We also have four smaller floor lounges, designated either for studying or for socializing. These, too, have become well-used spaces in the new building. Additionally, we have several familiar amenities from the old building, such as an aerobics room, a weight room, a large TV room, a laundry room and vending machines. Residents are making use of these facilities at virtually every hour of the day. The Thirsty Ear has also found a new home here and is in full swing during the week.

Over the past two years Ashdown residents worked tirelessly to incorporate larger “community” spaces into the building plans as well as to transfer key room names from W1. The Hulsizer Room serves as our dining hall and multipurpose room. The Crafts Lounge is still an open community space with the ever-popular piano and ping pong table. The Ingram Room serves as a music room, where residents can practice their various
instruments (including piano). The Fabian Room is now a conference room and library. In the spirit of Ashdown tradition, these common spaces are dedicated to and remind us of people who gave so much to this dorm and community.

In addition to the new facilities (and the grateful absence of rattling pipes), many wonderful things have emerged from moving to NW35. The population of Ashdown House has grown substantially. We currently have over 480 graduate students living in this building, compared with 250 residents in 2007. Far from being a drain on resources or from fragmenting the population, this has helped invigorate our community. For example, a number of residents have been regularly attending the AHEC meetings because they would like to be more involved in the dorm. We also have over 50 officers committed to improving all aspects of the dorm life. Many of these officers are first year graduate students, who were inspired by the social atmosphere already present in Ashdown House. With their help, we were able to host an unprecedented number of large events in the last two months. Aside from the regular Coffee Hours and Sunday brunches, we have organized a dance fusion party, a Halloween party, a scavenger and a Presidential Debate series, along with smaller orientation events and floor events.

Ashdown House has also resurrected its old (and popular) dining program, which now serves a buffet-style dinner in the Hulsizer Room 5 nights of the week. This dinner is open to all MIT graduate students, and quite a few people in the area take advantage of the good food and good company. Finally, we are now located in the heart of the NW Corridor. This has helped strengthen our connections with other graduate dorms at MIT. For example, in September we ran a large collaborative dinner with Edgerton House and Sidney Pacific Graduate Community. It was entitled “Taste of the NW”, and each course of the dinner was served in a different residence hall. Over 600 graduate students had their main entrée at Ashdown House that evening.

The Ashdown community has been a vibrant and integral part of MIT Graduate life for several decades. Despite moving to a new building on the other side of campus, our sense of community and our desire for a friendly and social environment remains strong. The difference is that we now have more residents and better facilities with which to realize these goals. Looking into the future, I see great possibilities for Ashdown House, and I know that we will never give up our purpose or our traditions.

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Ashdown By the Numbers

- Ashdown House consists of 541 beds split over 5 floors (82 on the first floor, 126 on the second floor, 150 on the third floor, 97 on the fourth floor, and 86 on the fifth floor).
- Buildings 1 and 2, which face campus, are only 3 floors high, but there are 9 bedrooms on the roof as part of duplex apartments.
- There are four types of rooms: 205 efficiencies, 45 two-bedroom apartments, 32 three-bedroom apartments, and 50 three-bedroom suites (no living room or kitchen).
- On the first two floors of building 2, 57 beds are being used to host the Phoenix incubator group, who will eventually move into the renovated W1 old Ashdown building.

Want more photos? Check out the link to the Photobucket gallery on the last page!
On Oct. 13th 2008, members from across the broad spectrum of the MIT community assembled in the MIT chapel for a memorial honoring Prof. Robert Hulsizer who passed away on April 30th this year due to complications arising from Alzheimer’s. It was a short and moving ceremony and the chapel was filled to capacity with friends and family. Several members of the MIT community attended including colleagues, students, mentees, members of the Ashdown community and many others whose lives he touched in little ways. After a short prayer ceremony, several of his favorite hymns were recited and then several friends and colleagues remembered the man who was an inspiration to so many. His colleagues from the Physics department remembered his enthusiasm for teaching and how he was a brilliant physicist as well as a good man. A student spoke about how his enthusiasm motivated her to achieve big goals in her own career. Others remembered his helpfulness and how as Ashdown Housemaster he helped the parents of a student who got detained by immigration authorities at Logan. Coffee hour at Ashdown, instituted by him was fondly recollected as was Casino Night hosted by Carol Hulsizer. His wicked sense of humor, his zest for life, his empathy for people and his inherent kindness were reminisced. His many qualities endeared him to both students and colleagues and when his son Steven Ascher said “We were twice as lucky to have you in our lives”, many people were moved to tears.