

## The Official Newsletter of the Ashdown Community

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### Message from the Editor

Dear Reader,

Today, the mention of Ashdown House evokes images of sleek, new buildings and rooms with a modern decor. Not so as little as three years ago, when some would consider Building W1, the original Ashdown, the embodiment of dilapidation. In this issue, we are pleased to feature current resident Jessica Fujimori's delightful piece on Ashdown before the move in 2008.

Next, a look into the future as we interview Ashdown's very own Tim Hsieh about his and partner Jason Gao's project "nChooseTwo", a growing online dating service in which one can suggest romantic matches for one's friends.

Finally, in the Citizen's Corner, Allison MacLachlan shares her experience of being in the MIT Women's Chorale, and David Kwabi gives his take on MIT stereotypes. I do hope you will enjoy these fascinating stories as much as I have!

Sincerely,  
Liang Jie Wong  
Ashdown Newsletter Officer

### In This Issue

- ❖ Ashdown, New and Old: 70 Years of Home
- ❖ Interview with Tim Hsieh on nChooseTwo
- ❖ **Citizen's Corner:** "Life beyond the lab" in the MIT Women's Chorale
- ❖ **Citizen's Corner:** Nerd Paradise
- ❖ Citizen's Corner: Submission Guidelines
- ❖ Contact the Editor

## Ashdown, New and Old: 70 Years of Home (1/4)

by Jessica Fujimori

It was home to mice and roaches and fish and grad students. Its heaters leaked and its stairs creaked and its floors splintered into residents' feet. It was old and used rundown, and it was home.

It's a distinctively old and grand-looking building, complete with cupolas, clocktower, and turrets overlooking the Charles River at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Memorial Drive. Once the Riverbank Court Hotel, built in 1901 and bought by MIT in 1937, Ashdown became the second graduate dorm in the country when it opened in fall of 1938. Now, more than seven decades later, the graduate community of Ashdown has settled into its new home in NW35, the so-called New Ashdown. They moved from W1, the original Ashdown, in 2008. The "Old Ashdown" is undergoing major renovations and will open in fall 2011 as an undergraduate dorm newly dubbed Maseeh Hall, after the donor who provided funds for construction.

To its former graduate residents, however, the dorm remains Old Ashdown. They remember Old Ashdown with a smile and laugh that is part nostalgia, part good-natured ridicule.

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**“ Someone later told me that if you don't want to live in Ashdown, it's not that you put them way down on your lottery, it's that you **don't put them on the lottery at all.** ”**

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"I put in 13 entries in the housing lottery, and numbers 12 and 13 were Ashdown," graduate student Theodore Golfinopoulos remembered. "Someone later told me that if you don't want to live in Ashdown, it's not that you put them way down on your lottery, it's that you don't put them on the lottery at all."

"I put it as eighth choice out of eight," graduate student David Shirokoff said. "When I found out I was going to be in a room in the Old Ashdown, I was pretty upset, and I called MIT housing and insisted they must have made a mistake. They informed me there was no mistake."

*continued on page 7*



*New Ashdown (left) and Maseeh Hall (right), the renovated face of Old Ashdown, both enjoy vastly different reputations from Old Ashdown in several important aspects*

Photographs courtesy of Cydnie Trice

[http://www.mitadmissions.org/topics/life/residential\\_life\\_housing\\_options/fariborz\\_maseeh\\_hall.shtml](http://www.mitadmissions.org/topics/life/residential_life_housing_options/fariborz_maseeh_hall.shtml)

This article also appeared in MIT News: <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2011/old-ashdown-quirky-glory.html>

## Interview with Tim Hsieh on nChooseTwo

nChooseTwo (<https://www.nchoosetwo.com/>) is an online dating service created by Ashdown resident Tim Hsieh and his partner Jason Gao. Since its inception, the service has been gaining popularity among MIT students. We approach Tim to ask about how he and Jason hit upon the idea, why he believes it is unique and where he sees the project going.

**3am: Which year are you in and what is your major?**

Tim: We're both in the first year of a Ph.D. program; Jason is in CSAIL and I am in physics.

**3am: What is nChoosetwo about and what is novel about the idea?**

Tim: People meet each other thanks to mutual friends. nChooseTwo is merely an online version of this. We really want to emphasize that nChooseTwo is not a traditional dating service; there are no compatibility tests or algorithms, and everyone you potentially interact with on nChooseTwo is a member of a local community of friends. Unlike dating sites such as OkCupid or eHarmony, friends play a central role in nChooseTwo, suggesting matches and making the key connections between their friends.

**3am: What prompted you and Jason Gao to start nChooseTwo?**

Tim: Just before winter break, Jason noted that no one has really leveraged the network of friends to facilitate dating. We wanted to make it as easy as possible for a friend to help out two friends in a variety of scenarios.

**3am: What time commitment and expertise does creating and maintain such a dating service require?**

Tim: The time commitment comes from coding and publicizing the site; during our launch, we were each putting in around ten hours a day. Maintaining the site does not take as much time.

**3am: Are there any new features in the works for nChooseTwo? How do you plan to expand it?**

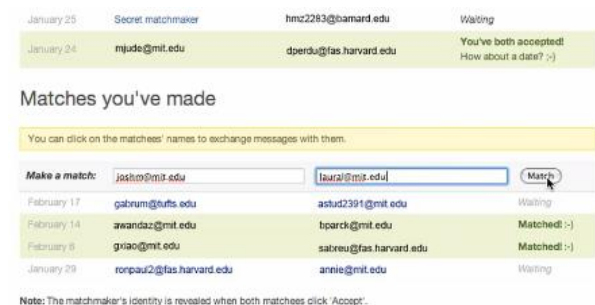
Tim: Yes, there will definitely be new features coming out very, very soon! We will continue getting feedback from MIT/Harvard/BU students before considering further expansion.

**3am: Can you give us a hint regarding what to expect?**

Tim: One of the new features will let you brag about how awesome and date-able your friends are! Hopefully in a couple of days, you'll be able to see the precise thing.

**3am: Can you give us an idea of how many people are using it and with what frequency?**

Tim: Right now, around one in seven MIT students is using the site. We haven't quantified the frequency of use.



*Screenshots from the introductory video on the nChooseTwo website <https://www.nchoosetwo.com/>*

**3am: Where do you see nChooseTwo going in the future?**

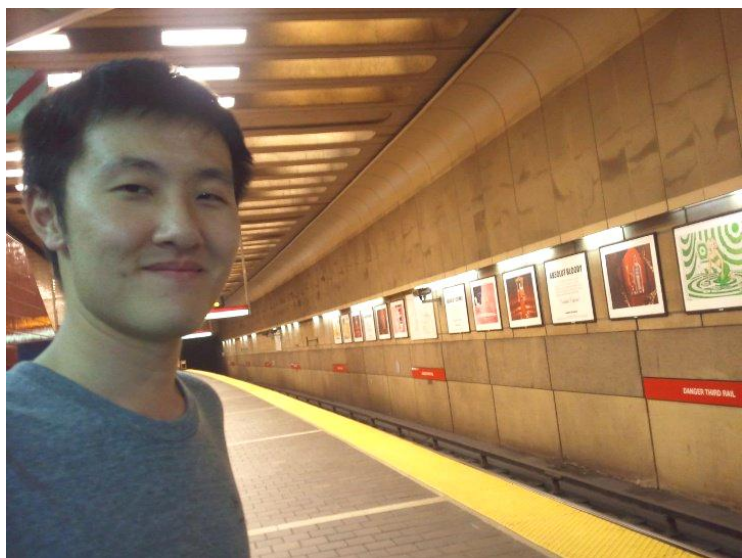
Tim: That will depend a lot on our users and what they wish to see; we've been listening carefully and responding to their requests.

**3am: Have you or Jason had any prior entrepreneurial experience or experience creating such an online service?**

Tim: When we were undergrads at Harvard, we won the grand prize in the commercial enterprise division of the 2008 Harvard Innovation Challenge. Our entry was a location-based smartphone service where users can contribute content anywhere they are, and other users in their vicinity can see that content.

**3am: Which entrepreneur do you admire most and why?**

Tim: I guess my favorite entrepreneur is Bill Gates- I admire his charitable work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.



*Co-founders of nChooseTwo Tim Hsieh (left) and Jason Gao (right)*

## MIT Women's Chorale Experiences

*by Allison MacLachlan*

If you listen carefully when you're walking through building 10 on Thursday nights, you might hear the MIT Women's Chorale hard at work. After a few scales on the piano and a chorus of rustling pages, the real music begins.

Graduate students, administrative assistants, post-docs, wives, scientists and alumnae come together on the third floor, in a room overlooking the Boston skyline, to sing. Despite their many differences in culture, in language, in age, in origin and in work, they all have two things in common: they are women, and they like to lend their voices to song.

This fall, I sang with the Women's Chorale to prepare music like Spanish carols, Chinese folk songs and our main challenge —Vivaldi's Magnificat—for a concert that was held at the end of the semester. After the Thursday rehearsals, there was always time to share tea, snacks and stories.



I have sung in choirs on and off since I entered grade school, and even had the opportunity to do a tour of concerts in schools and churches throughout England with my Canadian high school choir. Singing with a group is fun, active, and also an effective stress reliever. I thought that joining a recreational singing group at MIT would be a perfect opportunity to maintain my hobby while meeting new people.



*Some faces of the MIT Women's Chorale*

The Chorale, sponsored by the MIT Women's League, has existed at MIT since 1933. When the group first started, the singers were all wives of MIT's male scholars and faculty. But with many more women as scientists and students at MIT today, the group represents a range of roles within the community. Since the 1970s, the chorale has also welcomed women affiliated with Harvard.

With welcoming brochures and an open attitude toward new members, the chorale easily made me feel at home. It introduced me to a small sample of the broad range of women who make an impact on MIT campus every day. Through a low-key atmosphere of song and conversation, I had the chance to hear about their career paths, their families and their cultures, for which I am grateful. Stepping out of my daily pattern of interactions with professors and peers, I found it refreshing and enriching to get to know women from varying walks of life.

With an age range of several decades between the youngest and the most seasoned members of the chorale, there was always something new to learn, not only about music or moving into this city, but also about the history of one particular MIT community that exists, small and vibrant, beyond the lab.



*The Chorale in action*

**A note for music lovers: The MIT Women's Chorale will be performing *Johann Michael Haydn: St. Leopold Mass* on Sunday, May 15, 2011 at 3 pm, at the Dante Alighieri Society. **Free and open to the public.** Details at <http://web.mit.edu/womensleague/womenschorale/>**

*Photographs in this article courtesy of the MIT Women's Chorale <http://web.mit.edu/womensleague/womenschorale/>*

# Nerd Paradise

by David Kwabi

Before coming to MIT, I expected it to be much of what popular imagination has tirelessly built it up to be: an oasis of self-consciously unashamed nerds who delight in lab work, adore engines and make calculus jokes very very often. And, to be sure, the technical spirit is alive and well here, manifesting as much in the culture as the very grammar of student life.

There's the building naming system, which I've found wonderfully economical, although a little flattening (I'm sure we'd all agree that building 33 is very far from building 32); the course naming system (isn't there something a little bit dehumanizing about having to say "I'm in course [number]?", or even worse, "I'm a course [number]?"); the hack system, whose greatest exploits I hear are behind them; the Infinite Corridor, which sounds to me, now that I've seen it, like the product of a real math lover; and the giant ode to math on the lawn next to the Student Center.

Seeing as MIT is 150 this year, one could be excused for relishing the lengths to which the administration will go in paying homage both to the rich legacy of past intellectual accomplishments, and the deliciously round number of years it took for them to happen. Will 150 be spelled out in a line of binary characters along the Infinite Corridor? Will the hackers silence their critics and fly it over campus on a rocket, or have it lit up with fireworks across an unsuspecting night sky?

Probably not. But then this brings me to what I think the MIT stereotypes get wrong. Nerd Paradise or not, I've found MIT to be pretty ordinary. And not just because I'm now used to telling people I'm in course 2. Rather, I've come to see how simplistic "nerd" itself is as a category. True, most people I've met like math and science and *xkcd*, but this fact is often so crowded out by aspects of their personalities and identities that exceed their work and research that in the end, the sharp nerd/not nerd distinction doesn't mean much. The simple fact seems to be that here, as everywhere, most people won't fit into small boxes.

For me, it's been all the more difficult to realize this because unlike ethnic stereotypes, this one carries its own wrongness, and is such a diffuse and well-worn brand that it's somehow not too hard to imagine students at some "Institute of Technology" scuttling from lab to library, greeting each other in equations. And after all, it's easy to reject the notion that "all Chinese people are short" by saying "Yao Ming is Chinese", but hard to do the same with "nerds like math." My take on the matter is that true nerds - those who *actually* care about nothing but math - are a much smaller and nastier species than is ordinarily envisioned, more Mark Zuckerberg of *The Social Network* than *actual* Mark Zuckerberg, if not worse, and that while MIT may feed off its myths (and the awestruck tourists in lobby 7), its true powers lie in the comprehensive ordinariness of its students, in spite of all those truly crazy equations.

## Ashdown, New and Old (2/4)

There was one redeeming feature that made Old Ashdown desirable to some graduate students, however.

“It was the cheapest,” graduate student Michael Matejek explained. “It was about \$530 a month; I think the next cheapest was Tang, about \$100 more.”

But somehow, the dorm won over many of its reluctant residents with something other than its low price tag.

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“It actually turned out to be a pretty good experience,” Shirokoff said. “If I did things over I’d probably put it as my first choice.”

“You got the sense that this was a very grand, fine building with a layer of dust on the veneer,” Golfinopoulos said. There were the antiquated elevators that “were quaint as long as you didn’t have to use them,” the hardwood floors that often bequeathed splinters upon his feet, the red carpeting that once made the unfortunate acquaintance of Golfinopoulos’ pasta sauce—luckily of the same red hue.

The central location of the building added to the appeal of the dorm.

“Especially when you’re new to Massachusetts, you don’t want to deal too much with the cold,” graduate student Tamer Elkholy explained. “You just cross the street and then you’re in the main building. It was also convenient, in the better-weather days, if you want to just cross the river and go to Boston—it’s right there in front of you.”

But far more important than the building or location was the community of people that lived there. “It was very social compared to other dorms,” graduate student Ian MacKenzie said. “All the dorms have events but Ashdown probably had a much higher participation rate.”

Part of the reason for the more social atmosphere was the layout, according to former residents. The dorm had a lot of double rooms, which was fairly uncommon in graduate dorms. “You had less privacy, you got to know your roommate a little better, for better or for worse,” Golfinopoulos said.

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“Also, the fact that a lot of the rooms didn’t have kitchens helped because you had to go to common kitchens, and that’s how I met a lot of people,” MacKenzie said. Old Ashdown had a common kitchen on each floor where residents would gather to cook and eat together.

“You’d see a lot of people pushing their carts of pots and pans and graters and spices toward the public kitchen on the floor, and you’d have some person cooking Ramen next to somebody cooking up Grandma’s favorite bok choy stew,” Golfinopoulos remembered. To cook, you went to the community kitchens. And to relax and watch a movie, you went to the one of the two TV rooms.

“There was the large TV room and small TV room,” Matejek said. “They both weren’t really decorated too nicely, the small TV room in particular. You went in there and there was an old ratty couch, and there were just a million things piled up. They had this really small TV with a little VCR

## Ashdown, New and Old (3/4)

player, but it was good enough.”

And if both of those rooms were occupied, there was always the TV in the gym. Golfinopoulos remembered one time he and a friend borrowed Planet of the Apes from the front desk DVD collection and the only TV they could find was the one in the gym in the basement of the dorm.

“We went to the gym, surrounded by all the weight-lifting equipment, and watched Heston point guns at apes,” he said. “Because it’s Ashdown, and you make do with what you have, so we watched movies in the gym.”

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Then there was the Thirsty Ear pub. The bar is not a part of the newly renovated dorm, but has moved to New Ashdown. Some residents said they like the new Thirsty Ear more, but others said they miss the atmosphere and accessibility of the original.

“It was kind of a typical dive bar, except atypical in the sense that it was all students usually that went there,” MacKenzie said. “I liked that it was very accessible. People would be walking by Mass Ave, and it’s right there, so you’d get students who were from outside of MIT as well, and I don’t think you get that quite as much at this Thirsty Ear.”

Elkholy agreed. “It’s still there, but the old Thirsty Ear felt kind of different,” he said. “It felt like more people from outside MIT would come to the Thirsty Ear, because it had built up a reputation. On Saturdays, people from everywhere would come to the Thirsty Ear.”

Though the Thirsty Ear was a fun part of the dorm, sleeping grad students didn’t always appreciate the loud crowds. “On the one hand you had a cool place to hang out right where you lived, but on the other hand there was a source of inebriated passers-by who stumbled into the courtyard at odd hours of the night, still engrossed in whatever story they had been discussing over beer and unaware, as happens at a certain level of intoxication, of their volume,” Golfinopoulos recalled.

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Old Ashdown was home to a number of more organized social events as well, including a big Thanksgiving dinner for residents, Coffee Hour every Thursday, and the historic Cherry Pie Society. The Cherry Pie Society, founded in the 1950s, was just what it sounds like—a group of MIT students gathered for the consumption of cherry pie and intellectual discussion. And at each of these informal monthly dinners one could find Dr. Avery Ashdown, beloved housemaster and the source of the dorm’s name.

“The fact that the building took his name speaks to the level of closeness that existed between this housemaster and the residents of the building,” Golfinopoulos said.

But the role of the Ashdown housemaster was traditionally more than just that of friend or



## Ashdown, New and Old (4/4)

mentor, he continued. “The housemaster has been, at least in the Ashdown community, a center of the community and something that provides continuity.” As graduate students come and go, the housemaster remains for many years. “That provides this continuity, and this memory of what is the building, and what is the community itself,” Golfinopoulos said. “So, the housemaster is this central feature, and I think Avery Ashdown initiated this, and all of the other housemasters have been following in his footsteps in that sense, providing the pillar of the community.”

Current housemasters Terry and Ann Orlando are upholding that tradition begun by Avery Ashdown all those years ago. Terry and Ann Orlando have been Ashdown housemasters since 2001, and they oversaw the transition from the Old to the New Ashdown two years ago. Both lend a warm and welcoming atmosphere to the Ashdown community, residents said.

“They’re both very kind people. They’ll go out of their way to help you out,” MacKenzie said. “I enjoy talking to them; they’re good conversationalists. They’re both very intelligent in terms of engineering but they also know a lot of other things as well, so you can talk to them about anything.”

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“They try to go out of their way to meet people who live in the dorm, which is nice,” Matejek added.

The housemasters and the residents who transitioned from the Old Ashdown to the New Ashdown may well be the only true source of continuity between the dorms. Though some parts of the New Ashdown bear the same names as in the Old Ashdown, like the Hulsizer Room and the Thirsty Ear, they look and feel very different. And even the longest-employed worker in Ashdown can’t recall the earliest years of the dorm, those first few decades with Avery Ashdown and the Cherry Pie Society.

“There’s this philosophical question of the king’s boat,” Golfinopoulos said. “You have a boat, and it belongs to the king, and over time you replace planks of wood and the sails and the sailors, so that at some point there are no planks and no sails and no sailors left from the original boat, and even the king may have changed, but they still call it the king’s boat. Is it the king’s boat or not? What makes it the king’s boat?”

So what makes the dorm Ashdown? The old elevator gratings are now shiny and silver doors, the straight brick walls are modern curves of glass and metal, the laundry room lacks an ankle-deep cesspool, and there are no mice or roaches to be found. Still, perhaps it was only right that the name follow the Old Ashdown residents and housemasters from W1 to NW35.

“There is some continuity in that community; what we called Ashdown did move from one place to the other,” Golfinopoulos said. “Part of that community was the building itself, and that’s gone now, and part of that community are the people who lived in it.”

Even so, nostalgia remains for that “kind of a charm under this layer of dust and grit” in Old Ashdown, and the long history present in the building, and looking out over the Charles River at sunset with the knowledge that students for the past 70 years had been living and eating and sleeping and thinking in the very same spot. That much, at least, passes on to the 450-some undergraduates who inherit the building this fall.

## Citizen's Corner: Submission Guidelines

Do you have a flair for writing?

Do you have an experience you would love to share? A cause you want to speak out for? An event you would like publicized and reported?

The ears of Ashdown are thirsting to hear your story!



The "Citizen's Corner" is a section of "3am" aimed at reflecting the lives and perspectives of Ashdown residents. All Ashdown residents are invited to contribute, and all kinds of material are welcome. In the past, we have received everything from overseas exchange program stories to essays about environmentalism. We are especially keen on the views of international students comparing the way of life (in terms of culture, atmosphere, education system etc.) here to the ones they were used to.

### Guidelines in a nutshell:

- Submissions should be between 100 and 1500 words.
- No politically sensitive, religiously sensitive or pornographic material.
- Pictures to accompany text are welcome.
- Email title: "3AM SUB: <title of submission>".
- Email Liang Jie Wong ("Liang") at [ljwong@mit.edu](mailto:ljwong@mit.edu).

## Contact the Editor

Please direct any comments or queries about "3am" to Liang Jie Wong ("Liang") at [ljwong@mit.edu](mailto:ljwong@mit.edu)

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