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Can I Find Home?

Home is a complicated concept that varies significantly between different people. For some it is a place, for some a concept, and for others it is only an aspiration. A place that is created to share with people, that must be built with the people we care about the most. It provides a place of comfort and makes everything feel more manageable. Home is not something that everyone has, but it is something everyone can find.

When I first arrived at Virginia Tech, I was overwhelmed by all the people, the size of the campus. It all felt unknowable. The first day I stayed in my dorm room and ate spaghetti that was leftover from lunch with my parents. I missed my home and all my friends and family. The hallway felt as if it stretched forever and the common room felt bare. As more people moved in, however, my floor began getting busier and there were more people out and about. That night we had a meeting in our common room with all of Lavender House, an LLC for queer students and allies. At the meeting we painted rocks together and began to talk to each other for the first time. We were able to get to know the people from our dorm. I was feeling less nervous talking to people, and began learning about the other residents.

I began hanging out in the common room and seeing more and more people from my floor. We played games and watched movies together. Our common room began to feel warmer. People relax there after classes, talking about their day or doing their homework. The common room provides a break from the stress of life. I can talk to anyone about anything. Virginia Tech no longer felt as intimidating as it did the first day. It felt like a place where I didn't have to hide or downplay parts of myself.

In addition to being a place to have fun, our common room has become the place we study and complete our homework. The comfortable atmosphere makes the work feel less stressful. It gives us a place to ask for help on problems that we can't figure out. The whiteboards have become a space of collaboration where we can share our problem solving skills. Dotted throughout the drawings are the problems we have worked through together. Having other people there while studying also helps me to feel more accountable. When I drift off track they can nudge me back towards the right path. This makes completing work much easier than trying to find an isolated place in a building far away.

Through the common room I was able to meet the group of people who would become my friends. They were playing cards and I asked if I could join in. From that, we began learning more about each other and exploring the campus together. Virginia Tech began to feel more manageable; the sprawl of buildings started to make more sense. No longer did the drillfield seem like a vast expanse, now it felt like the heart of the campus from which you could reach anywhere. We grew closer with each event we went to, from the carnival to GobblerFest. After every event we would return to the common room, to play games and continue our conversations. The friendships I made helped the common room feel even more like home. I was no longer returning to a room with a few strangers. Now, whenever those elevator doors open, they reveal a room filled with friends.

As the common room became our home, people started bringing their friends from other dorms and even other colleges. These people quickly changed from visitors, to integral parts of our community. They now spend more time with us than at their own dorms. Our community events are filled with not only Lavender House members, but queer people from across campus. This welcoming community has made many of our guests want to apply to live in Lavender House for next semester and beyond. One person from Radford is even planning to transfer to Virginia Tech because of the sense of belonging in our common room. We have made the common room our home and begun to share that with others.

Lavender House provided a place where queerness didn't need to be hidden. It was one of the first places where everyone knew I was trans. Even among the barrage of attacks against queer people from the Trump administration, I felt safe. The common room served as an oasis in the desert. A place where I could relax with friends without worrying about whether or not a new executive order targeting queer people was going to be signed. At my home before Lavender House, I felt isolated, unable to talk to people about my experiences. My family and friends were accepting, but they didn't truly understand what I was going through. Lavender House provided a space where people not only knew what I felt, but who had also experienced the same things. I felt truly comfortable being myself for the first time in my life.

A few weeks after moving in we were called down to a meeting with the program director of Lavender House and several other university staff. They told us that after this year, Lavender House would be gone. It felt like getting punched in the gut. We were all silent while the news sank in. We wanted to know why, who had done this to us? The future felt shaky, uncertain, I was losing my house and my home. While I will still have the friends I have made, next year there will not be a common room. We have lost the space that we all share. Everyone is now facing the decision to try and find a new place on campus, or to find somewhere off campus to make our home. No matter where we end up, it will not be the same. The space that connected all of us will be gone and our community has been fractured. We will find a new home, but it won't make up for what we have lost.

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