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Dealing with a fire in the sky

by Sean Sweet

Highrise: adj. 1. being multilayered and equipped with elevators <apartments>.

Parachute: n. 1. a folding umbrella-shaped device of light fabric used esp. for making a safe descent from an aircraft.

You may be in need of the latter if you live in the former.

If you are like many students and live in a highrise building, a fire would present considerable danger to you. While this point of correlating fires to jeopardy seems blatantly obvious, the higher floor dwellers of apartments face greater quandaries than most.

For one thing, smoke (and fire) rises. For another, fire department rescue ladders only reach 19 floors at best. If you live in the top one third of the 33-story Fenwick Place (or another such highrise), listen up.

Over the years, there have been several fires at Fenwick Place, which is home to over 490 Dalhousie students and roughly 100 dependents. The causes of the fires are predictable — and avoidable. Grease fires in the kitchen. Dryer fires in the laundry room. Cigarettes left unattended on couches or beds.

According to Patrick MacIsaac, Facilities Coordinator at Fenwick, the latest of these was in September of 1994 — the location: compactor room; the culprits: welders from an outside contractor doing repairs to the compactor. The workers extinguished the blaze themselves. There was no damage, and no injuries reported.

Though there are no regular testings or fire drills at Fenwick Place, MacIsaac has been surprised by the efficiency of residents to evacuate during actual alarm situations. Escape plans are detailed on the back

of all doors in the residence, and the staff is always prepared to respond to fires or alarms.

"The staff have a vested interest in Fenwick. They live here," said MacIsaac, who is also a resident.

The night managers, all students and Fenwickians, act as an early warning system. They can access both their main office and Dalhousie Campus Security via two-way radio while on patrol. In addition, they have been trained by the City of Halifax Fire Department in the use of fire extinguishers, as well as first aid procedures.

But what do you do if you live higher than the 19th floor? Don't rush out for that umbrella-shaped device just yet. There are strategies for your evacuation that don't require free-falling descents.

Captain Mike Boutilier, of the Fire Prevention Division of the City of Halifax Fire Department, says that while situations vary, there are two things to do. Stay put, or move.

When you hear an alarm bell and want to leave your apartment, approach your door with caution. Feel the door for heat. If cool, open the door slowly — just a crack. If there is no detectable smoke in the corridor, close your door and head for the stairwell. When you reach the door to the stairs, repeat the heat/smoke test. If all seems well, begin your descent. If you encounter smoke on the way down, exit the stairwell on the lowest possible floor, and head for an alternate set of stairs. Proceed as before.

Don't be too worried about encountering dead bodies in the stairwell as in the Toronto apartment which caught fire last week. There, six people were suffocated by smoke on their evacuation route. The stairways at Fenwick Place have been designed to prevent such smoke ac-

cumulation. The top of the staircase is ventilated in a method called, 'top-venting.' Air from the stairwells is constantly blown outside the building. This prevents the chimney effect, wherein smoke that hits the roof curls back down into the area it came from.

MacIsaac doesn't believe that smoke could get into the stair tower at Fenwick.

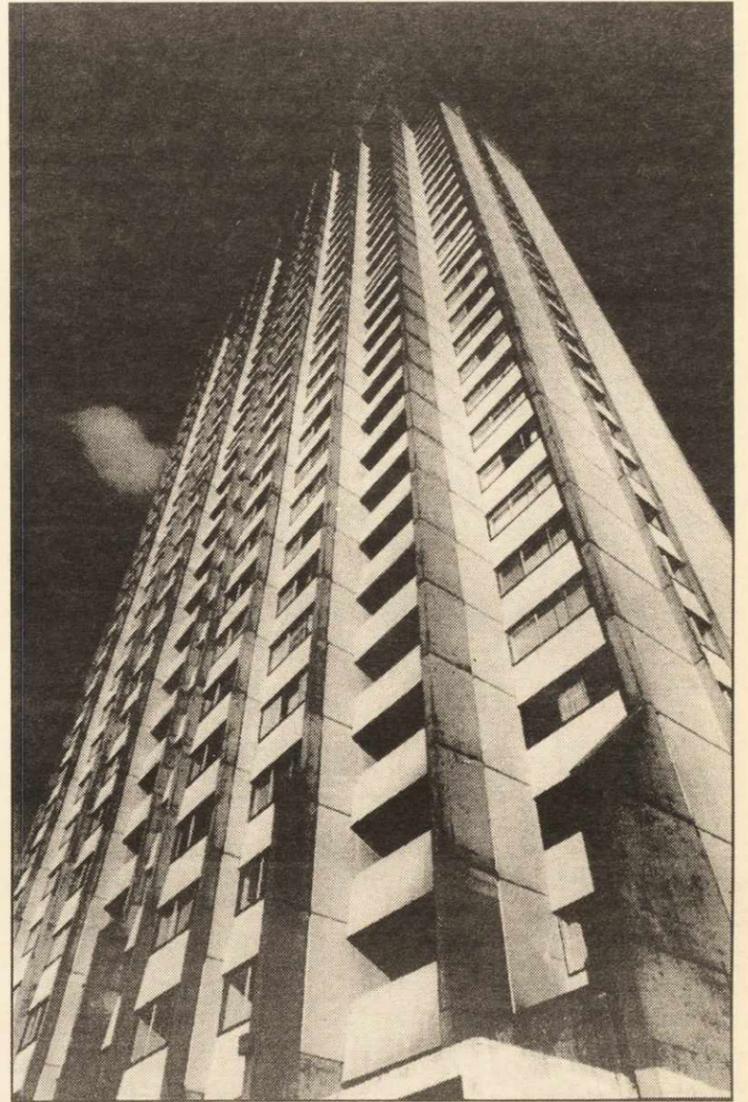
"The stairwell doors are fire-rated to five hours," he offered confidently.

In some cases, however, it is safer to remain in your unit. Know your building's escape plans and signals. Listen to the voice communications system for instructions. Never use the elevator. Report all fires to the department (note that the emergency phone number in Metro is NOT 911; it is 4103 for the fire department). But above all, do not ignore fire alarms.

Boutilier warns residents not to become complacent to the sound of fire alarms. Even though you may hear several alarms a month (or a week), don't fall into the 'boy-who-cried-wolf syndrome.' Contact your superintendent, and be ready to evacuate.

And if you like to set off alarms for fun, find a new game. In addition to rousing fellow residents, you put firefighters at risk. The Fire Department responds to every alarm. They do so at high speeds on Metro streets. Boutilier recalls a fatal traffic accident involving a response to an intentional false alarm. He, himself, suffered an injury from sliding down the fire pole too quickly (he fell from the second floor of the fire hall) — the call turned out to be a prank. He thought about that for the two months he was off work recovering.

Intentional false alarms are viewed very seriously by the legal/justice system. No longer will those



The towering Fenwick Place is home to close to 500 Dalhousie students.

PHOTO: MIKE GRAHAM

convicted get a slap on the wrist. You can find setting off fire alarms in the Criminal Code of Canada. Guilty persons will receive a heavy fine and/or a prison term. Add to that a municipal by-law, in the works, that will tally up more dollars and hard

time. It's not worth the risk of human lives to fool around with emergency equipment. It's not worth the price you pay for being a practical joker. What ever happened to the whoopee cushion?

Dalhousie's tuition increase decreases

by Lisa Lachance

It isn't all good news, but it is not as bad as it could have been.

On January 17, the Dalhousie Board of Governors will be receiving a proposal from the university Finance and Budget Committee to lower the tuition increase in 1995-96 from 10 per cent to 6 per cent. This was the recommendation contained in the Sixth Report of the Budget Advisory Committee (BAC).

The 'tuition increase decrease' proposal comes after the university was forecasted to have a \$3.3 million surplus. This surplus developed after a cut in provincial grant funding to Dalhousie was more than accounted for by the provincially imposed faculty wage freeze and rollback imposed by the provincial government.

Board member Barbara Walker pointed out that the infamous "BAC 3 Report" called for the university community to "share the burden of reduction." The current move to increase tuition by 6 per cent seems to come from a similar vein of sharing.

This "BAC 3 Report" included recommendations for vertical cuts — i.e., the closure of the theatre and music departments, costume studies programme, and the schools of public administration and library and information studies — as well as differential fees for specific programmes and international students. Although the recommendation for differential fees was carried out, the proposed closures of various programmes were not.

The \$3.3 million surplus will be divided amongst various items, including offsetting tuition costs. One-quarter will go to faculties to conduct negotiations for early retirement packages, approximately \$800,000 will go to deferred maintenance projects and a further one-quarter will be retained.

One of the disadvantages of this decrease is that student assistance contributions will decrease. The amount of student assistance is based on a percentage of tuition increases.

Eric McKee, Vice President — Student Services, made a presenta-

tion to the university committee of Student Relations and Residence which looked at some indicators of student need tracked by his office. Dal enrollment in all programs has remained steady for the years from 1989 to 1993. Withdrawal numbers for programs, however, have seen an increase in the last three years.

Mr. McKee also pointed to numbers from a 1994 Students' Union of Nova Scotia (SUNS) Report on student debt showing median numbers regarding student debt load between \$11,000 and \$13,000. Some Dalhousie debt loads were looked at in the graduate and professional programs. The debt load for first-year students in these programs topped \$30,000 in some instances.

Despite these high debt loads, there is no student protest planned for the January 17 Board of Governors meeting, breaking a three-year tradition. Student anger seems to be reserved for the federal Social Security Review.

Unofficial faculty feedback regarding the six instead of ten per

cent tuition increase appears to be mixed. After all, it is faculty's wage loss that is resulting in students' saving. On an ironic note, the former

Chair of the Budget Advisory Committee, Dr. Alasdair Sinclair, has negotiated an early retirement package with Dalhousie.

There's lots going on this term! Watch out for the following information supplements in the Gazette:

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| Jan. 26 | Social Security Review & Rationalization: two burning hot issues that nobody seems to completely understand |
| Feb. 2 | Black History Month supplement
International Development Week feature |
| Feb. 9 | Pink Triangle supplement |
| Feb. 16 | Arts supplement |
| Mar. 2 | International Women's Week supplement |

If you are interested in contributing to and/or finding out more about any of these supplements, please contact us!

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