

## WHAT STUDENTS BUILD

*On finding a place for students to hang their coats.*

**By Lee Burdette Williams**

**T**HE WOMEN'S CENTER is being renovated. Our small but centrally located former meeting room in the student union is getting an addition. We'll now have an extra eight foot by twelve foot space with a window to the outside. Although this may not seem a very large addition to the casual observer, it is hugely significant to the student volunteers who spend hours in this place and are thrilled with the increased elbow room.

The renovation requires us to remove things from the walls, including a series of paper cutouts in the shapes of volunteers' hands. As I put them into an envelope, I smile at the faces they bring to mind. Here's the cutout of Ingrid's hand. On each finger, she's written a descriptor of herself: "Proficient with gluestick." "Heck of a dogsitter." "Solid Gold dancer wannabe." Here's a hand from Friend, the aptly named winner of our first "Congeniality Award." In large letters reads the message, "I love being a woman." Here's a cutout *foot*, with painted toenails, from the irrepressible Natalie. Michelle's paper forefinger and thumb hold a pentagram between them. Christine's is cut from a glitter-covered brown paper bag that was part of a centerpiece for the banquet that followed the Women's Leadership Conference. Kelly's is missing a pinky, just as Kelly is. A couple have Bible verses written on them; another has lyrics from Ani DiFranco. There's mine, in the shape of a two-fingered peace sign, wearing a woven gold wedding band, with the message, "Believe in yourself." All are colorfully and thoughtfully decorated, and I take care not to damage them as I pull them off the wall.

Elsewhere on campus, workers are installing the roof panels of our new \$34 million convocation-center-slash-basketball-arena. It is a behemoth of a structure, dwarfing all the buildings around it, an imposing sentry at the front edge of the campus, announcing to all that

Appalachian State University is no tiny mountain college. Our seven-thousand-seat arena will host Division I basketball games in style, unlike our current gym, hardly distinguishable from a high school facility.

The day after I return the paper hands to the women's center for reinstallation, I find myself standing across the street from the convocation center, watching the ten-story-high crane swing the roof panels into position. I watch the workers occasionally take a break from their task to whistle at women students walking nearby.

The convocation center is an impressive building, and good things will undoubtedly happen there. Its presence on campus will eventually become a comfortable one, with the vicious battles fought over its construction forgotten in a few years, maybe a few months. It stands as a testament to the perseverance of some, the fundraising ability of others, the capitulation of still others, and the wealth of a few.

The women's center opened in 1998 as a student organization housed in the union, with one graduate assistant and twenty-five volunteers to staff it. The annual budget was \$6,000. Its presence is a testament to the vision and perseverance of women at Appalachian, who for twenty years asked to have a women's center, and to a chancellor and vice chancellor willing to give it a try. A group of students, faculty, and staff met weekly over the course of a semester to plan its every detail. In this, its second year, it is now a tribute to the students who

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commit their time and talent to it and continue to reshape it in their own images, as unique as the paper hands on the wall.

There has never been a crane involved in the building of the women's center, just students and some interested faculty and staff. No groundbreaking, fundraising, official naming ceremony, just the day-to-day operations of a little corner of campus that means more to its volunteers than most visitors would ever guess.

**B**EFORE I CAME to Appalachian, I worked at a small college in the Midwest. I served that decent little institution as director of campus activities and had the chance to help plan the construction of a new campus center. It was one of the best and most difficult learning experiences I've had as a professional. From the start, I saw myself as an advocate for student interests—seeking their opinions and trying to get them heard by the people who made the final decisions about this \$6 million renovation and addition to a vacant building. I worked with a number of committees, spent untold hours with the architects trying to translate students' needs into bricks and mortar, and supervised a staff that became incredibly invested in the building and its possibilities. We toured the building regularly throughout construction, students making suggestions as we went.

I had two consistent allies—a vice president for student affairs whose commitment to students was unwavering, and the chief architect, a woman from a Pittsburgh firm named Sherry McKibben who sought my opinions regularly and worked hard to incorporate our ideas into her marvelous design.

I remember once talking with a group of students, one of whom offhandedly said, "I hope the campus center has coat hooks."

"Huh?" I asked, at that point more used to requests for things like deluxe video systems and hammocks.

"None of the rooms on this campus that we meet in have coat hooks. So we're always throwing our coats on the floor." I realized she was right—my coat had spent plenty of time on floors around campus and had

the dingy look to prove it. The other students present immediately agreed with a vociferousness that surprised me. Who knew?

"That would be very cool," one said. "And it's not like it would cost a lot." So the next time I talked with Sherry, I asked if there was a chance to add a space in the conference room for coat hooks.

"Not a problem," she said, and her next fax of the blueprints showed not just coat hooks, but a recessed wall that would allow students and others using the room to hang their coats out of the way of traffic. I

showed the students the revised plan. "They really listened to us?" one asked, suspiciously.

"Absolutely," I said. "It's a good idea. A lot of your ideas are good ones." They considered that for a moment and, satisfied, moved on to the next topic.

I wished that every request was so easily met. Although we achieved a number of our goals for the building, we also lost a few battles as budget realities and politics won out. But in the end, as the campus center neared completion, my

staff and I, and the dozens of students and staff who had worked on the planning committees, felt pretty wonderful about the building we were about to open.

The coat hooks were installed in the conference room, attached to a lovely piece of dark-stained white birch molding that matched the room perfectly. Big brass hooks—ten of them. I remember looking at them the day after they were installed, imagining them with a dozen winter coats hanging from them, my own personal symbol of our commitment to students' needs.

And then one day, the center's operations manager, Jeff, came to my office. Jeff had been hired during the construction, and he had taken over the management of the countless details involved in running this new building. We had been in the building for several weeks and were anxiously awaiting the start of school.

"Lee," Jeff said, avoiding eye contact. "Ben and Marcia were here yesterday." Ben and Marcia were the vice president for institutional advancement and the director of alumni affairs, respectively, and had done an exceptional job of garnering the support needed to outfit our building. "They've gotten enough alumni

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contributions to endow the conference room, so it will officially be called 'The Alumni Conference Room.'"

"That's great," I said, knowing that each successful endowment of a space in the building ensured a stronger operations budget.

"They said that the plan is to put two display cases in the conference room with college memorabilia in them." He still wasn't looking at me.

"Okay. That'll be nice . . . I think. Is there a problem?"

"They brought a cabinetmaker with them yesterday, and they measured the recessed space where the coat hooks are, and they're going to put a tall case there. So the coat hooks have to go."

"No—that won't work," I quickly said. "Where will people hang their coats? There's got to be another space for the display case. How about against another wall?"

"They really like the recessed space; they said it was perfect."

I went to see Ben the next day, and tried to explain the importance of the coat hooks—visible evidence that students' suggestions and needs were considered at every turn as we planned the center, but

it was fruitless. A vice president always trumps a campus activities director. Big money always trumps a seemingly insignificant student need.

A few weeks later, the display cases arrived. They were indeed lovely—dark wood to match the room, brass hardware. Jeff stopped by my office with a screwdriver and told me he was about to take down the coat hooks. I summoned my staff members Drew and Christopher, two fine student-centered warriors who understood the gravity of the moment, and we followed Jeff to the Alumni Conference Room. He solemnly unscrewed the first coat hook and handed it to me. He gave me the next two, which I passed to Drew and Christopher, and put the rest in a box at his feet. We stood there in silence, looking at our coat hooks.

"Keep these," I said. "Keep them to remind you that . . ." Remind them of what? That there are always limits to what students build? To our influence? "Just keep them, OK?" They nodded, and we returned to work.

The campus center opened on schedule and was immediately loved and heavily used by students. In perhaps the most gratifying semester of my career up till that point, I wandered through the center every day, watching students do exactly the things we heard them say they would—study in the nooks, socialize in front of a fire in the living room, sell things at the contact tables, linger in the snack shop, shoot pool till all hours on the beautiful purple felt table we had special-ordered to match the décor, and, of course, meet in the conference room all day and all evening. As the weather got cooler, and they started wearing coats, I tried to ignore the coats piled on the floor, and asked Jeff about pricing a few free-standing racks. What did it matter? I asked myself. What did ten coat hooks matter in the scheme of this lovely building?

One day soon after opening, Sherry came from Pittsburgh to do a final, thorough check of the building. It was a lovely fall afternoon, and the atrium at the entrance of the building, a striking four-story space, was full of students who were standing in line to get their freshman common reading experi-

ence books signed by the visiting author. I stood nearby and noticed Sherry on the second floor, her nose practically pressed to the paneling on the wall, one hand holding a clipboard, the other running along the molding, oblivious to the frenetic activity all around her. I watched her for a few moments, touched by the intensity of her focus. I thought of all the faxes, the phone calls, the changes she made to honor the requests of the individual students and groups that all had a stake in this building. Could you move this outlet over here? Can this door be moved to this part of the room? Can this be a window? Can we have a closet over here to store chairs? Sherry almost always figured out a way to do it.

So I climbed the steps and looked down over the railing at the seventy-five or so students milling below. "Hey everyone, can I have your attention?" I shouted. "Up here." They looked up toward me. "I've been hearing from a lot of you that you really like the campus center, and I wanted to take a minute to let you know that

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there's one person responsible for designing this great place, and I want you to know, too, that she has worked really, really hard to create the kind of place you asked for. Her name's Sherry McKibben, and she's standing over there." Their faces turned to where I pointed. Sherry stood there, wide-eyed, mortified at the attention. The applause was immediate and enthusiastic, with students shouting, a couple blowing her kisses. She smiled weakly and waved, embarrassed by the obvious warmth of the crowd below, and then returned to her paneling. The students went back to standing in line, and I walked over to Sherry. She looked at me and rolled her eyes.

"You didn't need to do that."

"Yeah, I did. They need to know who you are, and they need to know that you listened to them. They'll love this building more if they know *they* helped to build it." She smiled and shrugged, understanding, I think, what I meant. I left her to finish her work. I wondered what she thought of the new display cases in the conference room, but I didn't ask.

I STILL HAVE my coat hook, in a box with other mementos of my time there. I sometimes see the campus center in my mind, and in my imagination, it's always at night, always in late autumn, with the warm light from its many windows glowing in the darkness. It hums with activity, with learning, with laughter, with students who can say without doubt that their predecessors helped to build it, and that they have rightly inherited it. And maybe by now, Jeff's figured out a way to hang coats in the Alumni Conference Room. I hope so.

In the fall of 2000, the ASU Convocation Center will open with the requisite fanfare. Our stellar orchestra will play, and our marvelous choirs will sing. Our faculty will process; our students will assemble. Maybe the architect will be there—I don't even know who it is—and I'm sure the major donors will be, too. The workers who built it will be long gone, on to another construction job. Right now, it seems to be a soulless building, but one that will eventually earn its place in the affections of students. Perhaps it will take a few big basketball wins and

some championship banners, some great concerts and speakers. Give it a few years.

On the other side of campus, at the same time, the women's center will open for its third year of business—a place that had a soul before its door even opened, thanks to the hours of student care that went into its planning, into every square inch of its tiny space. It also has a coat rack—one of the first things I purchased from the budget. I often walk in there and see coats strewn about the chairs and floor. I pick

them up and hang them on the coat rack. I can't help it. "Are you a neat freak, Lee?" a student once asked me. "No. I just think you should appreciate the fact that you have a place to hang your coat. Not everyone does."

What students build endures. I know that now. When their voices are echoes within the walls of a place, when likenesses of their hands add color and character, when they can look around and see evidence that we think they matter, that their ideas and needs are important, then we have done our job. We can turn out the lights and go home for the night, knowing their space is safe, watched over by long-gone students, held in trust for the ones yet to come.

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