

Alumni share memories of this small building with a big place in the larger Rutgers lore

By Marty Siederer LC'77

“ON the Banks of the Old Raritan” stand four buildings, three of which can easily be seen from the Piscataway side of the river: The high-rise “River Dorms” — Campbell, Frelinghuysen, and Hardenbergh Halls — and a smaller building that has its own place in Rutgers lore: The Ledge.

The Ledge, now known as the SAC (Student Activities Center), may not have as “formal” a place in history like Old Queens on the College Avenue Campus, but it has a sentimental place in Scarlet hearts and minds.

When the Ledge opened in 1956, it was the only student center for the College Avenue Campus. An article in the 1959 Scarlet Letter yearbook referred to the Ledge as the College Avenue campus’ then all-male students’ “home away from home and an excellent place to meet students from the Women’s College (now Douglass Residential College) who visited The Ledge in great numbers.” The building contained a cafe, a lounge that served as a study area, a staircase that led to ping-pong and pool tables, and an outdoor terrace with views of the Raritan and Johnson Park in Piscataway. A year later, the open areas in The Ledge were converted to an infirmary when a flu outbreak struck the campus. In the early 1960s, an anti-segregation protest was held inside the building.

Jim Cuvillo RC’69 remembers The Ledge as the place where he saw “Flash Gordon” movies and students coming to the screenings in costume.

“During sophomore year I lived in Hardenbergh Hall and would go to the Ledge almost every night for a coffee, hot chocolate, soda, or a hamburger. Often, a Bob Dylan song, either ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ or ‘Positively 4th Street’ would be playing on the jukebox. Back then, jukeboxes were the only way to listen to music if a radio wasn’t available, and each song may have cost a dime. I would look around the cafe

area and students who were there seemed to be just chilling and getting away from it all. I once said to my friend that we should put a sign over the exit door saying ‘Leading Back to Reality.’”

For Bill Downey RC’79 RBS’83, The Ledge was a place to meet up with his friends who were commuter students and to see performances in a small venue. “I lived at Tinsley Hall and The Ledge was a great place to meet up with friends I knew from high school who were commuting to Rutgers,” he recalled. “Back then, Jean Shepard had a popular radio show on WOR-AM (radio) that was truly theater of the mind, and he did a number of in-person performances at The Ledge that cost around \$1.50 to attend, and were standing-room only. At the show I attended, he stirred up the crowd with comparisons of Rutgers to Princeton University.”

The Ledge hosted a variety of events, ranging from concerts by up-and-coming bands to performances by the Rutgers Promenaders Square Dance Club. On December 17, 1971, the bands Southern Conspiracy and Powerhouse were two bands that played at The Ledge. The third performer? Bruce Springsteen. The cost to see all three bands? One dollar. Springsteen returned on April 1, 1973, for another triple-bill concert that ran five hours, and also featured Southern Conspiracy and Heavy Trucking.

For some alumni, The Ledge was their go-to place to watch television, particularly soap operas. Nancy Abrams Bernheimer RC’84 and Barbara Pollison Beck RC’82 remembered watching the milestone episode of “General Hospital” marking the wedding of main characters Luke and Laura. Eugene “Gino” Gentile RC’80 lived in the river dorms and, like most students, did not have a TV set in his room.

“Keep in mind that this was way before having cable TV or Internet access was available,” Gentile said. “I used to meet up at The Ledge with a friend who was a commuter student. So, part of my Rutgers memories include going to the Ledge with



The Ledge, seen above in 1965, opened in 1956 and was the only student center for the College Avenue Campus.

Left: The Rutgers Promenaders Square Dance Club meets.

PHOTO COURTESY RUTGERS UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

my friend and hearing ‘All My Children’ play in the background.”

The Ledge was a springboard for careers in the music industry. On November 6, 1971, Looking Glass, featuring three class of 1970 Rutgers graduates — Elliot Lurie, Lawrence Gonsky, and Pieter Sweval — gave a free concert. The band went on to record and release “Brandy,” a number-one hit in 1972. (More about Looking Glass in the Fall/Winter 2019 issue of *1766*). Lenny Kaye RC’67, who went on to fame as a member of the Patti Smith Group, spent his student years playing with his band The Zoo at the Ledge and the campus fraternity houses. Kaye interviewed protest singer and songwriter Phil Ochs at the Ledge Cafe for an article that ran in *The Daily Targum*.

For commuter student Barbara Wright RC’78, The Ledge “was my campus ‘home away from home’ and my place of employment as a work-study student. I did my homework while earning minimum wage

answering questions in the lobby and watching people play pinball, and waited on the front steps to sit right under the stage for Elvis Costello’s first show at Rutgers on February 23, 1978.”

Rutgers School of Communications and Information Professor Steve Miller RC’79 lived in Frelinghuysen Hall and the Ledge was his go-to student center even after the College Avenue facility was opened. “The Ledge hosted the river dorms’ annual talent shows, but my biggest memory is going there one night, looking downstairs and seeing a disco ball on the ceiling and a hundred students dressed up in bell bottoms, leisure suits, and shirts with wide lapels. I still get nightmares about that evening,” Miller laughed.

Adam Wolf RC’87 recalled the “bottomless cups of coffee for 25 cents” that The Ledge served during the week of final exams, and Dan Kramer RC’72 “saw my first microwave oven at the ledge when

it opened. I was there when Cheech and Chong did a free show. I spent so much time there!” And for Tom Mueller RC’91, a slice of pizza at the Ledge was his go-to snack.

Mark Williams RC’77 credits The Ledge with improving his pool game. “One year I was awarded work-study money and the next thing I knew I was working at The Ledge. I was assigned to work with another student, Raphael, and together we both ran the place several nights a week. Basically, our job was to hand out recreational supplies like cue sticks and balls for the pool tables, and ping pong balls and paddles for the ping pong tables. In reality, though, we didn’t have to hand out much of anything. Very few students actually used The Ledge for recreation, at least in the evenings. Those few students who did show up mainly studied. Since neither of us wanted to study much, this freed up lots of time for Raphael and me to play pool.

“We even learned a few trick shots. We got so absorbed in our nightly pool contests that we started to get annoyed when students interrupted us for something as mundane as recreational equipment. Couldn’t they see we were busy?”

“I was a Jewish kid from a small mostly white town, and Raphael was a Puerto Rican kid from a big city. Things were pretty self-segregated at Rutgers back then.

There were some exceptions, but my experience at Rutgers in the 1970s was that most people hung out with those from their own ethnic group. At any rate, Raphael was the only Puerto Rican friend I had while I was at Rutgers, and he told me that I was his only white friend. Sometimes Raphael’s friends would come over and join us for a free game of pool (we were supposed to charge, but our friends played free).

“All in all, working at the Ledge was a pretty good deal for me. I got paid a little money, played a lot of pool, and got to be friends with someone I probably would have never met anywhere else.”

With the opening of the College Avenue Student Center in 1969, The Ledge and Student Activities Center are now its under-appreciated sidekicks. While the original floor plan has been replaced by cubicles and offices, and access to the terrace is limited, the memories of the “little student center that could” will always be there.

SPECTACULAR MUSIC FESTIVAL
Presented by Rutgers Commuter Council

Featuring The Bruce Springsteen Band
With Southern Conspiracy
And Powerhouse

Friday Dec. 17, 1971
Adm. \$1.00

At The Ledge
7:30 P.M.