



THE INDEPENDENT CAMPUS NEWSPAPER OF SWARTHMORE COLLEGE SINCE 1881

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Interrogating how we party in the post-save-pub-nite era

by Samantha Herron · October 1, 2015



From what I can tell, institutional memory at Swarthmore lasts like, four seconds. Unless you really drill the upperclassmen or do some hardcore Phoenix digging, the most you will probably pick up about Swarthmore's recent history by passively existing here is that the Administration does Bad Stuff and should really Listen To Us and Something Something Alcohol Policy Changes. But for a few buzzphrases ("Crunkfest," "funnels," "Did you know Childish Gambino played Upper Tarble in 2012?"), the

Swarthmore College that existed prior to my arrival here is mostly lost to me. This, I assume, is the nature of limited access to institutional memory — things get lost.

Pub Nite, as it currently exists, is a free weekly event: part dance party, part standing near that cute girl from seminar while holding a cup. In contrast to frat parties, it has a reputation for fluorescent lights, goofiness, and a casual, communal atmosphere. Though most of that description has been true for years, the “free” part has not. Pub Nite — here’s a recent institutional history lesson — used to be a fundraiser. Every Thursday, students forked over a four-dollar entry fee that went toward financing senior week activities and, crucially, the night’s kegs and cups. With the 2014 changes to the alcohol policy, the fundraising function of Pub Nite was banned, and with it the usual means of purchasing the watery beer the women’s rugby team seems to like so much. Online donations became the only available source of Pub Nite income and the future of weeknight pong games hung on the balance. Pub Nite’s survival began (and continues) to solely depend on a collective remembered love for a thing — a big enough collective remembered love to inspire regular student contributions of money, time, and energy.

As previously noted, our track record for institutional memory is grim. At first glance, however, that does not seem to be the case. When Pub Nite was announced to be at risk for dissolution last year, the campus was up in arms. The thought of a world sans hungover Friday morning lectures appeared to traumatize the student body. In the online comments section of the Phoenix exposé of the Pub Nite problem, an inspired cohort of alumni sang undying praises for this tried and true Swarthmore institution and threatened to stop donating to the college as a result of such an ignoble fallout. My favorite gem of passive-aggressive anger in the thread: “my double-legacy children can now look forward to a lifetime of being subtly pressured to attend Oberlin. Lucky them!” I was newly arrived on campus at the time and had never attended Pub Nite, but impassioned posts flooded my Facebook feed, encouraging me to support the cause if I wanted my future to include singing American Pie with drunken pseudo-strangers (which I totally did and still do).

As such, I anticipated a cure-all student uprising. All I got, however, was an increasingly slow-going GoFundMe site. Though Pub Nite has been “saved” for three semesters now, Swatties have mustered up less and less enthusiasm with each

round of donations and I've heard no rumblings of a more permanent solution. I'm not holding my breath, but a small part of me hopes that desperate times will rouse people to act. In my favorite movie, "Empire Records" (a shitty but entirely endearing 90's teen dramedy), a group of employees "save" their independent record store from being sold by hosting a late night benefit party and a rooftop rock performance. Kids on skateboards storm the storefront, shout, "Damn the man! Save the empire!" and fill plastic jugs with the requisite nine thousand dollars. I realize that "Empire Records" is fiction, but given how much love everyone advertises they had for Pub Nite (and, I admit, given my ever-present desire for my life to look like a teen movie), I really did expect a little bit more than a GoFundMe by now: an Olde Club show, an OSE sit-in, a hashtag, a telethon, a devoted senior standing outside Paces with a clipboard and a dream. I wanted a protest, a petition, a strongly worded letter! Where was the Parrish rooftop benefit rock concert? Damn the Man! Save Pub Nite!

Already, though, the GoFundMe for this semester did not reach its five thousand dollar goal. Unless some extra measures are taken, I don't see how the GoFundMe could reach that same goal next semester, or any semester after that. Is Pub Nite

going to die? And if it is dying, should we keep trying to rescue it? In a world hell-bent on rapid change, to try to keep things as they are is, in a great many cases, a noble, if futile, act. I think of museums and my middle school diaries and colonial reenactment towns and baby pictures. I fully support those passionate and stupid enough to throw themselves into “saving” something from the natural entropic tendency to disappear with passing time, but the payoff of those efforts is never the continued existence of the saved thing, but rather a memory of that thing — it will never again be the 18th century in colonial Williamsburg and baby pictures don’t stop anyone from aging. No amount of money will preserve Pub Nite in amber forever. To “save” something is relative and temporary, but, arguably, not useless.

As is, only half of the current student body has ever known a pre-Save-Pub-Nite! Pub Nite. Those in the 2016 and 2017 class years did, but soon they will graduate and if nothing is done, the memory of that Pub Nite will leave with them. Assuming the donation decrease stays its course, Pub Nite will eventually sputter to a halt, and it will make a lot of people, myself included, very sad. The Pub Nite that I know, though, is not, and could never have been, the Pub Nite that existed to fund

senior week. I only know a Pub Nite that was kept alive for its own sake by the sheer strength of memory (and the donations that memory warranted). “Remembering,” it seems, is not only an action verb, but a community effort and a ticking clock. Soon, maybe, memories of Pub Nite will be exclusively secondhand.

Do not be confused when the kegs run dry for good. The final Pub Nite, whenever it may come, will be devastating, but should probably not surprise you. That being said, it could be prevented, or at least delayed. There’s enough money in the pockets of Swatties to support Pub Nite semester after semester, but our collective remembered love for it will naturally dwindle. Maybe it’s worth the energy to convince incoming class after incoming class of the urgent need to save something that started dying before they got here, but if not, we can’t maintain a collective remembered love for Pub Nite when no one is left on campus to do the remembering. Even if someone were to swoop in with a million dollars dedicated to the infinite perpetuation of the event, even if something called Pub Nite happened in Paces every Thursday with boundless quantities of Natty Lite and a playlist of sing-a-long favorites, would that be Pub Nite “saved” once and for all, or would it be a

nostalgic mimicry – Pub Nite a la colonial reenactment town? It might be sadder if the collective remembered love for Pub Nite were to die out before Pub Nite did. My endorsement is this: At Pub Nites past, I have had moments of such complete stupid joy that I cannot fully comprehend a life at Swarthmore without it. Pub Nite is special and weird and sweaty and wonderful. For the short time that I've known it, I love Pub Nite a heck of a lot. I hope that we don't let it go without a good fight. I'm not prepared for a permanent Closing Time.

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