

Bulletin board set ablaze in Ham Residence Hall

BY ALICIA WINOKUR '16
PHOTOS EDITOR

In a building with no fire sprinklers outside of the kitchens, the unmistakable scent of a scorched something wafted through the hall as residents of Ham Hall evacuated the building. Sleepy students marched down the stairs, holding their hands to their ears to block out the noise of the fire alarm that sounded off at 1:34 a.m. Second floor resident Rachel Schmieder-Gropen '18 scrambled around the hallway as she went back to her room to get her comfort animal, walking by a community bulletin board as she went. "I smelled something really strong as I passed it," said Schmieder-Gropen. "I assumed it was burned popcorn."

Students congregating outside the dorm assumed it must have been a late night snack gone awry. "We all realized it was serious when the firefighters went in with their tanks and a fire extinguisher," said Jessica Brockway '16. "Then a few moments passed and campus security told us it was going to be a while."

A visit from a detective the next day confirmed the worst. The Campus Police log states, "A flyer that was pinned to a notice board was intentionally set on fire, a pull station was activated and the



Photo by Alicia Winokur '16
The second floor cork board of Ham Hall is scorched where a flyer was set on fire late at night last Wednesday.

building cleared." Five inches around and with single marks a foot tall, a brown and black discoloration marks the edges of the purple paper that once covered the newly charred cork board. Campus Police could not be reached for comment regarding the contents of the flyer.

Police officers are still investigating

the incident as an act of arson, which is a federal offense carrying heavier punishment than a misdemeanor crime. If the perpetrator or perpetrators are found, they could face up to twenty years in a state prison, up to two years in jail, a fine of up to 10,000 dollars or a fine and imprisonment, according to Massachusetts law.

An e-mail from Dean of Students Marcella Hall sent out the day after the fire stressed that anyone with information regarding the incident should come forward. "This behavior is incredibly dangerous and will not be tolerated in our halls," wrote Hall. "What may have been perpetrated as a 'harmless prank' or done in a moment of haste and thoughtlessness could have led to the serious harm of our students."

Hall referenced a 2001 dorm fire that occurred at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, imploring that students learn from the incident. Three students died at Seton Hall and 58 were injured. Students fled down smoke-filled corridors and some saw their classmates engulfed in flames. The fire at Seton Hall was started as a prank and resulted in two 26 year olds reaching a plea bargain where each was sentenced to five years in prison for arson and witness tampering. "We don't want this to happen here," wrote Dean Hall.

Mount Holyoke has had its fair share of infernos. The original seminary building, Williston Hall, Rockefeller Hall and the College Inn all burned to the ground between the years 1896 and 1985. All of these fires are believed to have been

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Ham Hall evacuated after fire



Photo courtesy of the Mount Holyoke Office of Communications
Ham Hall was the site of an arson last Tuesday when a poster on a bulletin board was set ablaze.

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caused by electrical issues and furnace issues.

Most troubling to students is the realization that the fire is believed to have been set intentionally. Confusion and fear make it difficult to understand what could lead someone to do such a thing.

"I'm not sure I like the idea of people pinning it on mental illness right away when we know literally nothing," said Lucy Bolognese '18, who lives in Abbey Hall but often stays the night in her girlfriend Schmieder-Gropen's room. "I just hope they

Ham Hall have no sprinkler system outside of their kitchens. Because all of these buildings are under 75 feet high, they are exempt from a 1986 fire safety bylaw that mandated the retroactive addition of sprinkler systems to buildings.

"Residence halls are outfitted with fire protection equipment that was installed and maintained according to building codes in place when the buildings were constructed," explained Richard Bigelow, Associate

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Director and Chief Engineer of Facilities Management. "While all of these build-

don't do it again. I hope it was an accident somehow, that they put it out and ran away."

Causing further worry is the sheer volume of students who live on Upper Lake. According to the Office of Residential Life website, Ham and MacGregor house 295 students combined, accounting for 13 percent of the campus. A fire set as a prank could easily devastate the campus were it to get out of hand.

Natalie Stile '16 isn't taking any chances and worries about another incendiary incident in the future. Since the fire, she has spent her days in her room on the sixth floor of Ham and her nights anywhere but. "Because of parties, I like to sleep with earplugs in," Stile said. "I'm afraid I won't hear the fire alarm, so I'm sleeping at my friends' [dorms]."

Outside of Ham and MacGregor, fire safety is spotty. Across campus, plastic sleeves on the backs of doors in dorm rooms are often empty where

there should be information about how to safely exit the building in case of fire. The Annual Security and Fire Safety Report for 2014 states that fire

extinguishers are located only on the first floor of buildings — a student on the fourth floor of a building is out of luck should a fire start. The same report reveals that while all dorm rooms have smoke detectors, Prospect Hall, North and South Rockefeller Hall, Torrey Hall and

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—Lucy Bolognese '18

safety measures, and that includes a long term plan of adding sprinkler systems to all of our buildings over time."

Massachusetts fire code 10.9.1 does not specify where emergency instructions must be located, only that they "shall be provided for...hotels and dormitories." But the inconsistent and often absent emergency instructions in dorm rooms does conflict with the state's code 20.8.1 which states, "New and existing hotels and dormitories shall comply" with the National Fire Prevention Association's same fire code section. NFPA's code 20.8 says amongst other things that emergency instructions must have "a floor diagram reflecting the actual floor arrangements, exit locations, and room identification shall be posted ... in every resident room in dormitories."

"They could at least put the slips on the backs of doors," said Erika Van An- del '16, whose room in Torrey Hall lacks both a sprinkler system and emergency instructions. "I feel like some-

where I've seen a little diagram, maybe it's in the lobby or by the stairs. I don't know for sure though."

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