



WASHINGTON AND LEE SOPHOMORE Tom Fellin (in insert) died in the fire that destroyed the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house on West Preston Street on April 11, 1984. A suspect was arrested in the case but was not convicted. The house was rebuilt and ready for students again by the fall of 1986.



REPRESENTATIVES of the international headquarters of Phi Gamma Delta joined local fraternity members for the rededication of the rebuilt fraternity house in the spring of 1987. Shown with them are (at far left) Dick Sessoms, W&L's alumni director and faculty adviser for the fraternity; Gray Castle (beside Sessoms, in front), W&L board of trustees member; Sandy Walton (second to far right), president of the W&L Alumni Association, and (at far right) W&L President John Wilson. (Patrick Hinley photo)

# A Fiji Remembered

## Tom Fellin, Who Died In 1984 Fire, Would Have Celebrated His 30<sup>th</sup> Class Reunion

Phi Gamma Delta had lost its charter. But Thomas J. Fellin and some of his fellow "Fijis" were rallying to get alumni involved to bring the chapter back to Washington and Lee University. These young entrepreneurs also hoped to turn the dilapidated structure on West Preston Street into a functioning space for a competitive fraternity at W&L.

The kitchen was being redone. New furniture was acquired. Brothers were bonding with brothers.

On April 10, 1984, Tom Fellin was a sophomore and co-president of Phi Gamma Delta at W&L. On April 11, 1984, Tom died in the blaze that destroyed the house.

This year would have been his 30<sup>th</sup> class reunion.

When his fellow Fiji classmates gather this coming weekend during W&L's alumni weekend, they will be remembering and honoring him. Photos and information about him have been placed in scrapbooks for the Fijis to see and a video from 1989 about the fire and the reconstruction of the house will be shown.

Tom Fellin has been on the mind of Kelly Harris, house director, since she discov-

ered a box of treasures tucked under piles of stuff in a closet in the frat house last fall. Dick Sessoms' name was on the box. At the time of the blaze, he was a neighbor as well as alumni director for W&L. He also was a mentor and savior to the frat boys living across the street, said Harris.

After his retirement, he donated the box filled with house history to Fiji. With his permission and help, the box was explored. There were pictures, newspaper clippings, plans for the rebuild, handwritten correspondences, post-it notes and more.

The architect, builders, decorator, photographers, writers and others instrumental in the process provided lots of information and documents.

When Harris went to talk with Sessoms after finding the box, he shared many stories from his years of mentoring, documenting and working with the boys of Fiji. Opening each file folder brought back floods of memories, good, bad and ugly of events from a generation ago. He also shared funny stories that for now will stay within the walls of Fiji, she said.

One of the great finds was a signed letter from Norman Vincent Peale to the boys of Fiji sending condolences and hope for the future. Peale was a Fiji from Ohio Wesleyan in 1920.

The box, with yet unopened gifts to share, will take time to go through completely, Harris said. As documents and relics appear, each is being scanned and protected for donation to the International Headquarters of Phi Gamma Delta as well as Special Collections at Washington and Lee University.

The Fiji house was rebuilt and ready for students once again by the fall semester of 1986. In April of 1987, Phi Gamma Delta was even one of the houses open for the Historic Garden Week tour.

A video found online produced in 1989 by W&L showed the backstories and efforts to rebuild the physical structure as well as the emotional house and brotherhood, said Harris.

The vague history of Tom Fellin became clearer as his only sibling shared memories with Harris. His brother talked about how Tom loved Washington and Lee and

chose it over a couple of Ivy League schools.

Tom was a baseball player in high school as well as when he got to Lexington. He had great leadership skills. He enjoyed the outdoors, reading, writing and fellowship with his fraternity brothers in Phi Gamma Delta, he told Harris.

During a phone interview, Tom's brother laughed and said, "He also liked cheap beer."

Tom wanted to major in English and economics. He wanted to study abroad. After that he planned on law school to prep for a career in politics.

The current Fijis got a chance to meet Tom Fellin's "little" (a new pledge upperclassmen take under their wings), who came back for Mock Con 2016 and supplied the boys with a couple of priceless pictures, said Harris.

Each year Fijis celebrate Norris Pig Dinner, a tradition since 1893. Its purpose is reuniting Fiji brothers for fellowship and celebration, explained Harris, and it will be held this weekend during alumni weekend.

"The current Fiji brotherhood decided this year will be extra special," said Harris. "During W&L alumni

weekend and the annual pig dinner the gentlemen of Fiji will honor the life and mission of Tom and his brothers of the era who helped bring this house back to the beautiful place it remains today.

"They say, 'if walls could talk.' These walls have," said Harris. "The box of treasures continues to shed light on the house built in 1890 by Alexander M. Nelson at 112 W. Preston St. The history, love and dedication overcame a tragedy and continues the dream of a sophomore who wanted to see his Fiji house and brotherhood thrive."

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THIS BOX containing photos, newspaper clippings, letters and various documents pertaining to the fire and the rebuilding of the fraternity house were found by Kelly Harris, the house director, last fall. Among the items was a letter of encouragement from Norman Vincent Peale.

