

Community celebrates the long-awaited opening of The May Belle Chellis Women's Center



Nicole Wood

The new Women's Center is used as a meeting place for many groups who focus on gender issues.

Many groups meet in a safe space

By Julie Birnbaum

Inside the May Belle Chellis House are a blue rug, burgundy couches, a kitchen, a dining room, offices and a reading room with a small library. However, the house is more than just cozy and inviting, it is the Women's Resource Center. Middlebury students interested in gender issues can feel comfortable meeting, talking, getting information, making dinner, studying or simply chilling.

"It's a comfortable, safe setting for discussion and dialogue," said Kim Krans, student coordinator of the center. "We're hoping it will become a real resource for women's issues...a place for organizations to meet as well as a social alternative."

The Chellis House, located directly behind Proctor, has open hours from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Currently holding open meetings in the house are: Artemis, a Women's Studies faculty group, Students for Choice, Lifechance, the Middlebury Gay Lesbian Bisexual Alliance (MGLBA), a Christian Fellowship women's Bible study group, Women's Union, a faculty gay theory group, the Chellis House Board of Directors, a faculty tea and the Women's Brown Bag Lunch.

The center will also be hosting dinner discussions to talk about gender issues. For these evening meetings, any group can use the center's kitchen to make dinner, providing a more comfortable and home-like environment.

"The Women's Center provides a focused setting for groups involved in gender issues," said Leslie Fesenmyer of Women's Union. "Groups which were scattered all over campus before can now be more aware of what the others are doing, and maybe they can pool their resources and get more people involved."

"We decided to meet in the cen-

ter because we deal with issues of sexuality," said Anne Schulz, convenor of the MGLBA. "Its resources could be helpful in giving people more of an awareness of these issues, and everyone seems to feel comfortable there."

"Our group is concerned about women's welfare and the place of women in our culture," said Angela Warnke, a member of Lifechance. "On a campus which can sometimes seem like a big men's studies department, it's nice to see a place dedicated to women's issues."

The Chellis House has no specific affiliation with any organization or academic department but is a neutral space that acts as an "umbrella" for any group which deals with gender issues. It is a place where everyone has an equal voice. Everyone is encouraged to use it to become more aware of issues which pertain to gender, both male and female. Men who may feel left out of the feminist movement can make use of the center's resources to become more involved.

"Women's studies should be of interest to everyone — they represent the experiences of half of the human race," said Diana Henderson, a faculty member of the Chellis House Board of Directors. "College-aged men may not have thought about the fact that it is not just women who deal with gender issues."

The Women's Center Constitution states its purpose as "an informational, educational and cultural resource for the students, staff and faculty...to bring a greater understanding of gender related issues to the community at large. The center will also provide a forum for the advancement and protection of women's rights."

"The center should be a climate where everyone can feel comfortable," Henderson said. "It is an alternative space where students and faculty can formally or informally

discuss gender issues and hopefully help to integrate Middlebury's social and intellectual life. Everybody has something to learn."

In its first year as an open, functional center, Chellis House is still forming new ideas about how it can best serve the campus. Students, staff and faculty are encouraged to come to the center's open board meetings, which are held at 12:15 p.m. every Wednesday. Striving to become a place where everyone feels welcome, the center is discussing plans such as musical events, study breaks and regular lectures.

"I'd like to see more people using the center's resources," Fesenmyer said, "meeting and learning without feeling uncomfortable or intimidated."

With construction expenses not yet paid off, the center is running on a limited budget and is asking for donations of household items or money. May Belle Chellis T-shirts are still on sale to raise funds. A wish list posted on the center wall includes items such as a TV and VCR, computers, a xerox machine, magazine subscriptions and pots and pans.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the Women's Center with a continuing budget," Warnke said, "but I'm just glad it opened while I am still here."

"Women's experiences and perspectives are not yet equal to men's in our society," Henderson said. "Calling [Chellis House] the Women's Center calls attention to this inequity. Maybe, in some future time, when society gives equal possibilities to men and women, it can be called the Gender Issue Center."

For everyone who worked to establish the Women's Center, and for those who use it, it will be a constant reminder of those issues which men and women can work to resolve.

Chellis set example for all Middlebury women

By Jennifer Murray

Most people do not even know where the May Belle Chellis House is, let alone the story behind its namesake.

Chellis House, as it is commonly called, is the new location for the Middlebury College Women's Resource Center, and can be found behind Proctor dining hall. The house was named after the first woman to graduate from Middlebury in the class of 1886, May Belle Chellis.

The fight to make Middlebury coeducational was a long one. Opponents of the idea argued that women were intellectually inferior, and that they would grow ill from the rigors of studying in the college environment.

People also worried that coeducation would harden women as well as "feminize" men. Despite this growing opposition, Middlebury opened its doors to women in 1883, largely due to insufficient revenue from low enrollment.

Chellis entered Middlebury that same year. Although women were allowed to enter as full time students, they were not given the same opportunities as male students. They were not allowed dormitories or places to socialize, and they were subject to scorn from teachers and students.

Chellis was a superior student

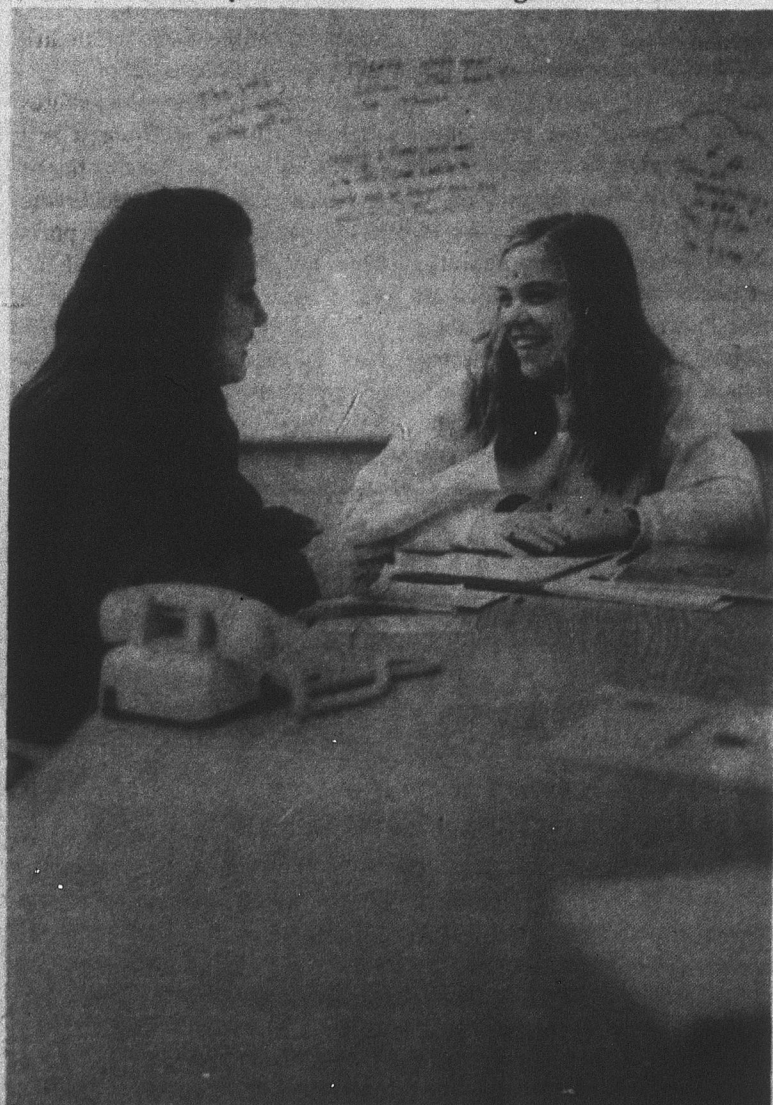
who did not let these difficulties hinder her success. She was second in her class during her freshman and sophomore years.

Chellis managed to complete all the requirements for a degree in her junior year, and graduated after only three years at the college, first in her class. She was not allowed to be valedictorian, however, because the school administration feared opposition from the trustees.

Despite this treatment, Chellis never complained. The graduation of the first woman from Middlebury College was a memorable event for all involved. She was permitted to deliver an essay at commencement that she entitled, "The Growth of Criticism."

An article in the school newspaper following the event said, "The appearance of Miss Chellis called out the warmest applause. The question of the day had been, will the trustees allow her to appear... When the class was formed on the stage to receive their diplomas, as she received hers, the audience testified their appreciation of the action of the trustees, also for the pluck and gut shown through the course by the first lady graduate of old Middlebury."

The trial period was over. Coeducation at Middlebury would remain, largely due to the intelligence and courage of Chellis.



Tiffany Clafin

Sophomores Tonya Eza and Kelly Bergman, members of Lifechance, meet in the Women's Center dining room.

Reading room commemorates former student activist

By Brooke Capps

The Alison Fraker Reading Room is, as Diana Henderson puts it, "a place where you can just be."

Located on the second floor of the Women's Resource Center, the room is named after a Middlebury English major who was killed in a car accident during her final semester of school in March of 1989. The room is a tribute to Fraker's love of reading and her hope to create a "safe space" for women on campus.

"Alison was active in a number of dimensions," said Fraker's former advisor, Henderson, professor of English.

"Alison was very popular and likable and was very interested in women's studies; at the time of her death, she was writing her thesis on Virginia Woolf."

As a student, Fraker was a Phi Beta Kappa member and heavily involved in sports and dance. But Fraker was probably best known on the campus for her eloquent stand against DU's hanging of a bloody mannequin from the second story window of their house. While most people chose to look the other way, Fraker spoke of the need to reconsider male and female spaces on the campus.

At first her plea was for a "safe space," a room where women could go and just be themselves. Little did she know that a whole house would later be dedicated to this cause.

"Most people think that a woman must be angry or unhappy with a

current situation to want a safe space, but that is simply not true, especially in Alison's case. She was none of those things; she looked upon the whole thing very positively," said Henderson. After her death, her family and friends saw a reading room as a perfect tribute to Fraker.

In 1991, the Women's Center became one of the long range plans of the college, although friends of Fraker and other students had been lobbying for the center as far back as 1989. Now, after two years of construction and planning, the reading room is ready for the public.

"At first, I think there was a lot of concern for the amount of time it was taking to finish the room, but now I think everyone is glad they took their time because the room truly is beautiful," says Henderson.

Currently the room has a few pictures of Fraker, both with the Middlebury dance company and alone.

There are two tables and two sets of bookshelves, with images of dancers incorporated into the woodwork, designed specifically to commemorate Fraker's love of dance. Fraker's father, an architect, designed both the room and the furniture and was on hand with his wife to dedicate the room on October 15.

The dedication, attended by many friends of Fraker, was both an opportunity to explain the significance of the room and its furnishings and also a chance to share feelings and memories of Fraker



Nicole Wood

Alison Fraker Reading Room serves as a space for reflection and learning about gender issues.

and her dedication to women's issues.

The room's collection of books, focusing on contemporary women's issues is beginning to grow.

It includes everything from a graduate thesis to an open journal in which students are encouraged to write.

"Because it is just beginning, there is no set agenda. The room is very flexible for the entire Middlebury community to learn in and to discuss gender issues in an informal setting," says Henderson.

Chellis House opens doors to community

By Andy Gardner

After many years of anticipation, the May Belle Chellis Women's Resource Center finally opened on October 15, the Friday of Homecoming Weekend. For many returning alumni, it was their first chance to see the result of their hard work and years of fighting for an idea in which they believed.

Some returning alumni had graduated before there was any discussion of the need for such a space, and others who returned were among the first students to propose and work towards the formation of the center.

There were current seniors at the opening who had been a part of the slow evolution of the Women's Center over their four years at Middlebury, as well as first-year students who have never experienced Middlebury College without a Women's Center. This mixture of people of all ages, professions and ideologies added energy and excitement to the celebration.

The opening was also an affirmation of the support of gender issues by the college community. In toasting the opening of the center, President McCardell pledged the support of the college administration, while other speakers reaffirmed the importance of a space in which to discuss gender issues. Everybody raised an enthusiastic toast to the future of the Women's Center.

After the toast, many friends, alumni, students and faculty curiously explored each unique room. On the first floor, there are two connecting common meeting rooms that can be closed off for privacy, a bathroom, a kitchen and a back porch. The walls, which were in the process of being decorated, were filled with fliers and announcements of different events.

On the second floor, there are faculty offices, an office for student groups who utilize the center and the Alison Fraker Reading Room. During the festivities, all the rooms were filled with enthusiastic supporters.

The opening of the May Belle Chellis Women's Center marked the strength of support of gender issues in the college community, and it will serve as a resource for all in the future as its influence expands.

agreed with the concept of the center, but not with the need for one on campus.

The next year, under the new McCardell administration, a temporary space in McCullough was designated for the Women's Union. At that point, the process of raising funds began.

Drue Cortell Gensler '57 established a challenge grant of \$20,000 that January, and by spring everyone's hopes were raised by the promise of an opening in the fall of 1992 at the center's new site, Tilden House.

Unfortunately, fall of 1992 came and went without an opening. Renovations of the Tilden House were delayed due to lack of funds, and despite the numerous fundraisers held by the center's supporters, the remainder of the necessary funds finally had to be donated by two of the college's trustees — Jane Bryant Quinn '60 and Claire Gargalli '64.

Construction began late in the spring of 1993 with hopes that the center would be open by Commencement Weekend. Professor Ron Liebowitz, Dean of the Faculty, was named as the project's administrative liaison and, once again, spirits were high.

Unfortunately, the May Belle Chellis Women's Center did not open last spring. Instead it opened on October 15 of this fall.

Its opening would not have happened even now were it not for the dedication of many tireless supporters.

Years of work followed inspiration for house

By Claire Calvin

It has been five years since the idea for Women's Center was raised at Middlebury. Despite many overwhelming setbacks and disappointments, some very devoted students, faculty and alumni have kept the idea alive and fought for its realization.

They have succeeded, and the May Belle Chellis Women's Center is a physical tribute to their dedication and perseverance.

The idea of a special place for women on campus first came about in the fall of 1988, in response to a fraternity incident which occurred in the spring of that year and which outraged many students and faculty, both men and women.

The incident which prompted the suggestion for a Women's Center was the hanging of a bloody female mannequin from the windows of the DU fraternity house in May of 1988.

The following year, in the spring of 1989, Alison Fraker, a senior woman who had been one of the most outspoken people on campus about women's issues, was killed in a car accident. The now-completed reading room in the Women's Center was made possible by a donation from Fraker's parents in her honor.

In the fall of 1990, the Women's Union was formed and drew up a proposal for a Women's Center. Later that year, the current college President, Timothy Light met with leaders of the Women's Union and



Roberta Stewart

Many of the loyal women who worked to raise money for the renovation of the Women's Center gathered in the fall of 1992 to celebrate and sell their new T-shirts. Throughout the long process of raising money, the students never lost heart.