

[\[back\]](#)



Duke focuses on neighbor relations

BY GREGORY PHILLIPS, The Herald-Sun

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DURHAM -- There's a guarded optimism among Duke University administrators, student leaders and even beleaguered neighbors who have endured hard-partying students that efforts to curb loutish behavior may start to bear fruit this year.

The new student government president has impressed residents by spending the summer building bridges in nearby neighborhoods. And Duke administrators say when some 6,400 undergraduate students cascade into Durham this month, there will be more friendly warning of incoming freshmen to respect their neighbors.

Residents of Trinity Park, which hugs Duke's East Campus, have dealt with student drunkenness, littering and noise for years. But off-campus student misadventures made bigger headlines than ever in the past academic year. An Alcohol Law Enforcement sting last August resulted in more than 150 citations for underage drinking, many of which were later thrown out for lack of warrants. In March, a men's lacrosse team party on Buchanan Boulevard yielded rape accusations against three players.

Duke Student Government President Elliott Wolf highlighted neighborhood relations as his top priority upon election. He has been organizing events to intermingle students and residents and has appointed a student community liaison officer who serves on the Trinity Park Neighborhood Association board.

"We want students to realize they live in Durham," Wolf said. "With that comes understanding that the people who live in Durham are our neighbors."

Wolf, a junior from Washington, D.C., is hoping to spark interaction that can continue without student government or Duke administrators. He believes that would make relations "not so much a Duke-Durham kind of thing as a neighbor-neighbor kind of thing."

The kind of students who behave badly at parties may not be first in line for neighborhood gatherings that don't involve a beer bong, but Wolf said he's not looking to entice or even guilt-trip them into engaging their neighbors. Rather, he's hoping to show Duke students what the Bull City has to offer besides college parties, partly through orientation events such as trips to a Durham Bulls baseball game and the American Tobacco Campus.

"Everything that goes with living in Durham, we want to extend to Duke students," Wolf said.

Neighbors will be involved in orientation, Wolf said, helping freshmen get settled, so students "will see the people helping them move in are the same people they might run into at 2 a.m."

Wolf said he doesn't see residents who want to eradicate partying, just the excesses that have tainted it.

"For the most part, the neighborhood just wants peace and quiet," he said. "There's a serious perception they're the moral police. They're not."

For neighbors, Wolf has been making the right noises.

"That's the perfect scenario, that what you will see is them be part of the community, to be enmeshed in it," said Alice Bumgarner, Trinity Park Neighborhood Association president.

"I'd really like to see some of the bridge-building we're doing pay off," she said, conceding that has to include residents not stereotyping freshmen who are in Durham for the first time.

Bumgarner realizes the reality will fall short of perfection, but hopes the stronger student-neighbor relations will foster a quicker, comprehensive response to inappropriate behavior.

"Sure, they're going to cross some lines every now and then," she said, "but the community will be there to let them know what's acceptable."

Law enforcement won't be far away either. Durham Police Sgt. Dale Gunter said the department's procedures will remain the same as in the past.

"The standard will be the same," he said. "Zero tolerance for inappropriate criminal behavior, whether it's parties, underage drinking or anything."

There won't be any excuses for getting out of hand.

"Duke students, any students, know how to act like model citizens," Gunter said. "If they don't there are consequences."

Larry Moneta, Duke's vice president of student affairs, echoed that but said an emphasis will be placed this year on prevention through warning students how the university expects them to treat their neighbors.

"We're trying to send a message to engage in a responsible way, rather than the way it's been in the past," Moneta said.

Freshman orientation will be "retooled" to include more targeted messages about what's acceptable and the negative consequences of breaking the rules, Moneta said. An e-mail will be sent to all off-campus students that Moneta didn't characterize as a threat, but said would ask them "to respect the rights and responsibilities of living off campus."

Besides that, Moneta said the university will continue with strategies used last year, when a new staff position was created to monitor complaints. Orientation changes included university coalition BlueSPARC (Study to Prevent Alcohol Related Consequences) handing out door hangers with safety tips, noise ordinance information and the dangers of high-risk drinking and more promotion of on-campus recreation.

"This is not a one-year process," Moneta said. "It's a multi-year shift in culture from an off-campus party scene to events on campus."

At least some Trinity Park residents seem to think the university's stance will be effective.

"More eyes are upon them, and there isn't going to be the same tolerance as there has been in the past," said real estate agent and resident Ellen Dagenhart.

Also optimistic of a fresh start this year, Trinity Park resident Frank Crigler said the "chronic problems" of the past shouldn't be held against new students, while acknowledging that past partying "was very noisy and kept me awake."

Crigler said he admired Duke for buying 12 houses near East Campus that were formerly rented to students and known as party houses. They included the 610 N. Buchanan residence where the rape was later alleged to have occurred. The seven vacant ones were put on the market this summer, with a requirement they be owner-occupied. One is now under contract, with two or three set to follow soon, according to the university's real estate office.

Moneta said there's a dearth of similar large houses conducive to student sharing near campus. He believes off-campus upperclassmen likely will migrate to apartment complexes near the West Campus, where he has meetings scheduled with property managers.

"Certainly it doesn't just solve the problem to have them partying in apartment complexes," said Kelly Jarrett, vice president of the Old West Durham Neighborhood Association. "Those are still residential."

Concerns have been expressed that parties occurring farther off campus will cause an increase in drinking and driving. Gunter said with designated drivers, taxis and safe-ride services, there's no excuse for that.

"Nothing causes anybody to drink and drive except for that person who drinks and then gets in the car with the keys," he said.

Despite that concern, Jarrett is taking a positive attitude to the return of students.

"I really hope the positive stuff is what shines the next couple of weeks," she said. "There certainly was no place to go but up after last spring."

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[\[back\]](#)