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Welcome home: A safe place for everyone

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We’ve all seen the Sloss House. Some of us pass by it every day on the way to class, that quaint old house nestled between Curtiss and Gerdin. It’s a sleepy-looking place, with an aging brick exterior and ivy winding in leafy helixes along the walls. But the true beauty of the Sloss House can’t be seen from the sidewalk.

The Sloss House is home to the Margaret Sloss Women’s Center (MSWC), which is dedicated to advocating for the equality of all students on campus. Regardless of a student’s gender, sexual orientation, race, or religion, a comfortable environment can be found for studying, meeting, or just hanging out inside the house. The mission of MSWC is to create a “safe space” for every student or faculty visitor, both physically and emotionally. At the Sloss House, every student who visits should be able to converse freely, speak his or her mind, and feel completely at ease.

The door of the house is the kind of glass-paned affair you can find on any residential home, coupled with a good old-fashioned screen door. And inside, visitors are immediately greeted by couches and cushioned chairs, lots of open windows, and if you’re lucky, the smell of freshly-baked cookies.

The house is full of cozy rooms, including two lounges with brand-new carpeting and lots of seating, coffee tables, and a quiet atmosphere that has the library beat hands-down for studying comfort. And if you ever need to catch up on some much-needed sleep, the house is equipped with blankets and pillows to suit your napping needs. Connected to the lounge, the sun room contains two longer tables for spreading out, and its French doors can be shut for quiet study. Also on the first floor is a computer lab with three desktop computers. Here, printing is free; just bring your own paper.

Sloss is a converted house, and as in all old houses, its beating heart is its kitchen. Equipped with all the commodities of home, including a dishwasher, oven, refrigerator, and cabinet space, anyone is welcome to store afternoon snacks. Cookies of all kinds can be found daily, and coffee and tea are provided to keep those academic synapses firing.

Besides the luxuries of the building, the atmosphere of the Sloss House is completely unique. The house is warm and friendly and, unlike most campus buildings, inviting. Depending on the time of day, it may be a tranquil retreat with only a volunteer or two reading in the corner. Or there may be people...
everywhere, curled up on couches, reading books and writing papers. Sloss is a common meeting place for groups to discuss everything from politics to knitting techniques. According to Petey Peterson, a graduate student employed part-time at the house, this interaction between people is the most important element of the house. “Here, students always feel comfortable conversing,” she says. “The coolest part to me is just being able to walk up to someone and start a dialogue—about anything.”

Peterson is one of four staff members employed at the house, including Director Chris Fowler, Assistant Director Som Mongtin, and Graduate Assistant Dustin Neff. “Our offices are just up the stairs,” says Peterson, “and one of us is always here, whether you need some help or even if you just want to talk.”

The Sloss House is open every weekday from 8 to 5. Every Friday evening, movies are shown on the house’s brand-new flat screen T.V., and meetings are held weekly in the lounge for groups like the Vagina Warriors club and C.A.K.E. (Crafts, Arts, Knitting, & Everything else). And, as if that’s not enough, the house has baskets (baskets!) of items that are free for the taking—from feminine products and contraceptives, to razors, perfume, and deodorant. Students often come to the house with bags and fill them to the brim with freebies. And that’s the way they want it, according to Peterson. “We get tons of items donated by the Thielten Health Center every year,” she says, “So take them. Seriously, take them!”

But the Sloss House doesn’t only offer free stuff to its visitors. Besides its mission to provide a “safe space” and a comfortable study location, the purpose of the Sloss House is to nurture healthy dialogue and discussion.

The Sloss House isn’t billed as an exclusive club. Neither is it meant to be a campus tourist trap to check off on your list of ISU experiences. The MSWC is a lifestyle for the open-minded.

“Not everyone here at Iowa State has this community, this safe place to be,” Peterson explains. “The Sloss House offers an extra comfort. Whether you’re homesick or just need a place to talk, we try to be your home away from home.”

“One misconception people have about us,” Peterson continues, “is that we’re not open to everyone. But our goal is to get the word out. The Sloss House is open to anyone and all students. And you can’t know what it’s like until you come here and experience the things we do.” MSWC caters particularly to women, but its facilities and activities are open to any gender, provided that the environment still remains safe and comfortable for everyone.

Students are also able to volunteer at the Sloss House. Currently, the MSWC has about fifteen regular volunteers, some of whom have gone through special training in order to provide counsel and act as peer advisors for other students. Volunteers cover a wide range of duties, from working with staff to create and lead programs to updating the bulletin boards and interacting with house visitors. “These volunteers are essential,” Peterson says. “Without them, we wouldn’t be able to be so open and available to every student.”

And there is no doubt that the Sloss House provides that extra comfort many students need to succeed here at the university. Peterson herself was a regular at the house during her undergraduate years when she welcomed the Sloss House’s sense of community and safe environment. Now, she says, “One of the best parts of my job is getting to know the students here at the house. I love when they just pop into my office, and we can have a chat about anything.”

Although the Sloss House is dedicated to welcoming everyone, its museum-like appearance doesn’t exactly radiate that warmth. But by simply walking inside, you begin to understand the personal support and friendship found within the Sloss House. Regardless of who you are, what you believe in, or who you love, all are welcome. So, Peterson says, “Take the time to come in and check it out. Even if you just want a cookie.” ELAINE GODFREY