

2006: Year of the Norovirus

Communicable disease, severe housing shortages and off-campus jobs for international students make news on University of Alberta campus last year

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News Writer

STUDENT HOUSING STRUGGLES

Student housing was hard to find for many in 2006, with the current economic boom being blamed as the cause of the shortage. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), from October 2005 to October 2006, Edmonton's vacancy rate (the number of unoccupied homes in the city) averaged an extremely low 1.2 per cent. Students' Union President Samantha Power stated the SU was trying to help with the situation by running an off-campus housing registry and by pushing for a universal transit pass to offset costs of travelling to campus from other areas of the city. Grant MacEwan began a program in August to address the student-housing shortage. It allowed for students from other schools to use their excess housing spaces that couldn't be filled by Grant MacEwan students. On top of the housing crunch, the University of Alberta is considering a ten per cent raise in the rent of residences in response to the increasingly expensive Edmonton housing market.

NOROVIRUS OUTBREAK AT LISTER

Lister Hall, the largest residence at University of Alberta, faced an outbreak of Norovirus, a highly

contagious disease that causes gastrointestinal illness. Common symptoms can include diarrhea and vomiting. In 2006, there were approximately 130 cases of students catching the disease. On 21 November, a Norovirus Outbreak Information and Feedback Session was held at University Hall. The session outlined the Office of Environmental Health and Safety's response and the lessons that were learned to prevent future outbreaks in university residences. The year also saw outbreaks of noroviruses in other Canadian institutions, such as Mount Allison in New Brunswick.

U-PASS ON TRACK

Progress was made on the universal transit pass this year. On 18 September, St Albert City Council committed to subsidizing a U-Pass. Later, on 10 October, the City of Edmonton also approved partial funding to the U-Pass. The subsidy of the two cities amounted to \$30 per student, with the U of A has committed \$15 per student. On 17 October, the Students' Council passed a motion to set the framework for a U-Pass referendum question in the spring. According to the question, a mandatory \$75 per semester fee would be collected from students.

CHEQUES FOR COUNCILLORS

Student Councillors voted themselves pay cheques this year. Former

Arts councillor Catrin Berghoff proposed the payment scheme to Council in April. She justified the decision, stating that it gave students with financial burdens and jobs an opportunity to alleviate their difficulties by allowing them to cut back on their work hours. Science Councillor Sylvia Shamanna was one of those who criticized the plan, and disagreed that the proposal would alleviate such financial barriers. Shamanna felt that motivations besides compensation should drive those that run for a position on the Students' Council.

JOBS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

This year international students were allowed to work off-campus for the first time ever at the U of A. An agreement between the federal and provincial governments resulted in a program that allows students to apply for a work permit through from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). The program was designed to give international students experience in the Canadian workforce while increasing Alberta's labour pool. Unlike the work permits for international graduates, which require an offer of employment, these student work permits allow the recipient to work in any job they desire. There is however, a 20-hour cap during academic sessions, and the limit raises to 40-hour workweeks over breaks.

Plenty of presidents make news in 2006

ROSS PRUSAKOWSKI
News Staff

INDIRA SAMARASEKERA

Unlike her predecessor who earned a reputation for avoiding publicity, there was no hiding for University President Dr Indira Samarasekera in her second year as head of the University of Alberta. Whether it was the confirmation of the renovations planned to the Bay building downtown or her vision to have the U of A rank amongst the best universities in the world, Samarasekera continues to overhaul the institution she took over. However, construction cranes weren't the only visible signs of the changes she's brought to the university in 2006. On a wider front, Samarasekera was among the first leaders of a Canadian university to opt out of Maclean's magazine's rankings of universities and her openness has led the Administration to work closer with the Students' Union on a variety of student issues including a Universal Bus Pass.

SAMANTHA POWER

From Vice-President (External) to President of the Students' Union, Samantha Power spent 2006 working and advocating for students. Wearing her VP (External) hat, Power dedicated much of the early part of the year talking to the provincial government, trying to influence its review of post-secondary education and make education more affordable for students. Even while the Progressive Conservative party was breaking up to back different candidates for leader, Power as chair of the Council of Alberta University Students spearheaded the effort to keep student issues in the foreground of the race. She continued this work after her election as SU President and has also pushed the Administration and the City of Edmonton hard to try and finally



NICK WIEBE

OUR RESIDENT PRESIDENT Indira was in the spotlight promoting the U of A.

make an affordable Universal Bus Pass a reality for students.

DENIS HERARD

Despite having the legislative progress grind to a halt because of a fall party leadership contest, former advanced education Minister Denis Herard made plenty of waves last year. In November, Herard introduced a new tuition policy 632 days after Klein promised Alberta would have the "most affordable tuition in the country." However, student representatives were disappointed by the new policy, stating it marked little change to the status quo. Add to that Herard's infamous Bill 40 in May, which deregulated tuition policy, and he might be able to take some small pleasure in being shuffled out of Cabinet at the end of the year.

GRAHAM LETTNER

He was only in office for the first four months of 2006, but for former SU president Graham Lettner, they turned out to be his most eventful. While he continued to push longstanding student concerns and issues, under Lettner the SU subtly shifted their opposition to annual tuition increases and began to lay more of the blame at the feet of

the province. But Lettner made a larger impact on the SU when he nearly killed the Travel Cuts settlement—and cost the SU a bundle—more than a decade after the lawsuit had begun. The near disaster awarded Lettner the honour of almost becoming the first SU president in years to receive a formal reprimand from Students' Council.

CARL AMRHEIN

This past year was a rough one for the University's Provost and Vice-President (Academic) Dr Carl Amrhein. Having been the broad public face of the Administration before the hiring of President Samarasekera, Amrhein slipped below the radar in 2006. He became as the bearer of bad news when informing the media and students of the Norovirus spreading through the Lister Hall residences, as well as being asked to play bad cop on every funding announcement from the provincial government. Perhaps the most controversial remark Amrhein made was during a January 2006 debate, when he chastised the Students' Union as not being fully representative of students because the SU fails to represent "wealthy [students] for whom tuition, quite frankly, is not an issue."

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