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Way-Out-of-the-Norm Dorm

Students From 9 Colleges Call Amenity-Laden Md. High-Rise Home

By Susan Kinzie
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As she starts her freshman year at the University of Maryland, Alyssa Evans will not be roughing it: She'll have a furnished single room with a double bed, private bathroom, cable and high-speed Internet. Her four-person suite has a full kitchen, a washer and dryer, a dining room table and black leather couches in the living room.

Her high-rise building has a game room with video games, poker and pool tables and flat-screen TVs, a rooftop deck, a pool and -- losing track here -- okay, and a big fitness center.

And tanning beds.

Going off to school was never like this. Especially because she's not even at school. The privately developed 910-bed student housing that opened last week is in Hyattsville, not College Park, in the middle of a construction mess that will eventually be a 56-acre development with shops, restaurants, a movie theater and offices.

And it's filled with students from nine schools.

So while Evans, 17, nervously waited to meet her U-Md. roommates, a bunch of Howard University sorority sisters were reuniting downstairs with hugs. A Howard graduate student arrived from Tennessee, hoping the building would be quiet. Catholic University students moved onto a floor that was set aside for them.

And hundreds of others from American, Georgetown, George Washington and Trinity universities and Montgomery and Prince George's community colleges were dragging in duffel bags, DVD players and pillows, their college T-shirts and visors a jumble of colors.

It might just be a sign of things to come, with booming enrollments and student expectations driving changes in housing. Some experts said they believe the Towers at University Town Center is one of the first such projects in the country to serve so many schools at once.

Research has shown that college students tend to be more involved and more likely to stay in school if they live on campus.

But many schools have bulging enrollments this year, thanks to population growth and the increasing importance of a college degree, and are now struggling to provide housing. That means Catholic, for example, can't squeeze in all the students who are coming this month, so it leased 58 beds at the Towers and arranged a shuttle bus loop to its Northeast Wash-

ington campus.

Student housing is a big issue here: The D.C. area has one of the highest numbers of college students per capita in the country, according to the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area. The group's 15 schools alone enroll more than 175,000.

Many schools have sparred bitterly with neighbors over student housing as lawns and driveways fill with cars, keg parties spill into quiet neighborhoods and music shakes once-quiet apartment towers. Some have come up with creative alternatives, such as the hotels that George Washington University converted into dorms, the partnership U-Md. formed with private developers to build apartment towers, the art studios American is converting to suites and the trailers Catholic put in the middle of campus.

Developers know a growth market when they see one, said Connie Carson, president of the Association of College and University Housing Officers International. In the past decade, she said, schools have gotten more competition as private apartments sprout up nearby.

Many schools have found that dorms can lure students -- or scare them away -- as they decide on a college. Colleges have tried to adapt to the consumer mentality many have now, Carson said, with students unaccustomed to sharing rooms or bathrooms.

So the bare-bones dorm rooms -- like the one Evans's father, Hal, had at U-Md., where he stooped to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling of his cramped double and shared the bathroom down the hall with 14 guys -- are fading away.

The median cost per square foot of dorm has more than doubled since 1997, and room extras such as microwaves and mini refrigerators are not unusual anymore. GWU's new freshman dorm has a maid service to clean the bathrooms and vacuum the rooms -- no more sticky beer patches on the floor.

Students pay an average of about \$800 a month for off-campus housing in the D.C. area, according to Jonathan Sawyer, dean of students at Catholic. The range is huge: Some spend as little as \$500 a month for a ratty shared apartment in the College Park area, and some are lucky enough to have parents invest in elegant Georgetown rowhouses for them to reside in.

On campus, students might pay about \$3,200 for an un-air-conditioned triple at Howard during an academic year, but rates from \$6,000 to \$8,000 at other schools are more typical. The average cost for GWU students living on campus is more than \$9,000.

At the Towers, rent ranges from \$695 to \$930 a month per bed.

The building is right at the Prince George's Plaza



Alyssa Evans, 17, of Owings Mills, Md., and her father take in her four-person suite at the newly opened Towers at University Town Center in Hyattsville.

Metro station, so it's an easy trip to several schools. About 40 percent of the residents are from nearby U-Md., which will run a shuttle there, and more than a third are from Howard. Some students were directed to the Towers by their colleges, and some found its Web site on their own.

Georica Gholson, who is starting the clinical psychology graduate program at Howard, liked that it was less expensive than places she checked in Northwest Washington, where the university is located. For Gholson, who will turn 24 in the fall, this is her first time away from home; she has always lived with her parents in Memphis.

She and her father, looking exhausted after driving all night in their jam-packed little gray Dodge Neon, waited in line to pick up her key card.

She hoped her suitemates would be quiet and studious -- no drinking, no smoking.

"I like that it's all students," she said, because it seems safer. "Hopefully, I'll still be saying that six months from now. I hope there isn't too much partying."

Downstairs in the garage, Amanda Murray, 19, was pulling Ralph Lauren linens from her Audi when a friend ran over to give her a hug. She and her Howard sorority sisters agreed immediately: This was the perfect mix.

Murray had just finished a summer internship at an investment bank in New York, and her boyfriend, a college basketball player, was flying in that night. She unlocked the door to one of the much larger first-floor suites, and her friend Todd Price clapped a hand to his mouth. "Whoa," he said, looking at the huge windows lining two stories on the far wall. "Okay!"

Murray showed off where she and her two suitemates would put patio furniture and grill outside, then turned back inside to where they would put bar stools on the stained-cement floor. She set her pink toile lamp next to her hot-pink bed.

Out in the hall, families staggered under armloads of boxes, waiting for the elevators and dodging workers with tool belts. Hal Evans emerged a few floors up with his arms wrapped around a 27-inch television.

Alyssa Evans was admitted to U-Md. later than most, so she had to find her own housing. Her dad, who works for the federal government in Baltimore, was nervous because the cost was higher than that on campus.

"Look at my closet," Evans said, beaming.

Her 13-year-old brother, Michael, wearing an "I love the ladies" T-shirt and a baseball cap backward, ripped duct tape off a box. She pulled a toaster oven out, set it on the kitchen counter and admired it.

"Yay!"

When the first of her three suitemates arrived,

Evans gave her a big hug. Stephanie Faudale said her friends in the dorms on campus are already jealous.

"Let's go see the pool!" Evans said.

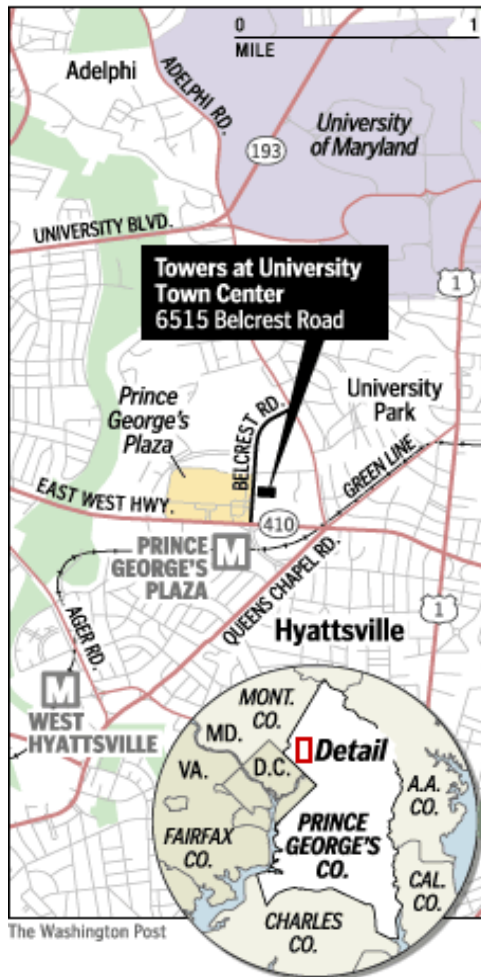
But when the elevator doors opened to the roof, a bunch of construction workers in red hard hats got in. Roof closed -- the pool is still a ways from being done. Workers were everywhere. Outside, machinery lumbered through the dirt and metal that will one day be condos; right now it's just loud.

It's nothing like the way Evans expected to start college. She was thrilled with the space, ready to make friends and glad that her floor seemed to be all freshmen: "I'd be creeped out living with older people. I'd feel out of place."

The only thing she wondered about was whether she would feel disconnected from campus. "Being in a dorm is part of the whole college experience," she said. "I think it'll measure up. Hopefully."



Howard University student Amanda Murray, 19, moves into a two-level suite with the help of her mother, Sarita, holding sister Cristine, 2.



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