

Landlord Tells Of His Inter-Racial House

(Robert Levine, a Madison landlord, has operated Villa Maria, the only large women's independent house run on an inter-racial basis, successfully, for a number of years. The Daily Cardinal has interviewed him, and the gist of what he had to say is printed below. This is the second in a series on the problem of discrimination in student housing. The next and last, will discuss what the University can and has done to enforce an anti-discrimination policy).

By ROBERT LEVINE
(as told to the Daily Cardinal)

My experience in student housing goes back to 1935, when I first became a house fellow. I must admit that when I first began, I did much to set the pattern for discrimination on campus. Jewish girls, even during the depression, could not gain admission to many of the independent women's dormitories. So, in order to establish a few places where Jewish girls could live, I made my first boarding houses all-Jewish houses.

During that period, other Jewish homeowners opened boarding houses in the Langdon street area, and they followed the pattern I had established. Once this pattern is established, it is difficult to shake off, because when a house gets the reputation of being a Jewish house, non-Jews just don't apply.

But when I opened the Villa, I realized that I couldn't continue this policy. As a Jew, I couldn't ask others to open their houses to my group, and yet shut my doors to members of other groups.

Six or seven years ago, we admitted our first Negro girl. (We hadn't discriminated against Negroes before then; it was just that none had ever applied.) There was no trouble at all from the girls who lived there.

Of course, Villa Maria is a big house—118 girls—so that if a few didn't accept her, it wouldn't be too noticeable. But I kept a check on the dining room; if the girl always ate her meals with the same people, I figured, then she wasn't being accepted.

You could never predict from one day to the next who her table companions would be.

A common alibi among landlords is that they can't operate on a non-discriminatory basis because their tenants would object.

This is hokum—as my own experience has proven. The number of applicants for Villa Maria has not decreased, but increased year after year. We have not only closed our waiting list for 1956, but for 1957 as well.

We try to discriminate in the better sense of the word. We do have a certain amount of

selection, even to a slight extent on the basis of race and religion. If we keep the Villa on a 50-50 basis—half Jewish, half non-Jewish—we can continue to get members of both groups. If we should have 60 per cent Jews and 40 per cent gentiles, word would get around that this was a Jewish house, next year we might have 65 per cent Jews, and we would wind up an all-Jewish house.

To say that the Villa is a bastion of equality or anything like that would be exaggerating—But we have something important here and I don't want it to go by default.

One more thing.

Many landlords say that if they admit students of minority groups, their neighbors will stop speaking to them and all their tenants will move out. Some are hypocrites, but some are sincere when they say this. They say they can't afford anything like this, and they certainly can't.

They are completely mistaken.

We've never had a bit of trouble, either from the students or neighbors. (We've had a little vandalism, of course, but no more than any other organized house.)

These fears, to the extent they are sincere, are completely without basis.