



Renter, Beware

How the dorm you've always wanted may not be the dorm you've been expecting.

by Raphael D. Chenault

Moving In

When I first received the letter, I was thrilled. Hale Ikena? Isn't that the really nice dorm? Awesome.

No longer would I have to deal with the public bathroom and reverberant hallway of Hale Kauanoe with its leaky lounge. No more would I have to question in fear of my life exactly what bathroom fixtures I could or could not touch in Hale Kanilehua. Gone were the days of navigating the twisted maze of corners and offset dorm rooms that is Hale Kehau, wondering if my suitemates would let people into my room.

No, I would no longer have to deal with a crappy, dirty, dilapidated, insecure dorm building. And I even get to have a kitchen! A real one! With a stove and full-sized refrigerator!

Such luxuries were practically unknown to me since having gone to college. Of course I grew up with them in my home, and I have periodically made my way back there to visit over the years I have been away, but I quickly forgot what it was like, having lived on various campuses for over four years now.

But now I was preparing myself for a life of privilege. I knew that I'd be able to run to the grocery store to get whatever I wanted whenever I wanted (as long as I could afford it, fitting the stereotype of the strapped, broke college student), because you know what? I now had a refrigerator to put it in, and a stove to cook it on. And maybe, just maybe, there would be a garbage disposal and a dishwasher, though I knew that would be asking a lot, even for the highly reputed "Campus Luxury Apartments."

I had first heard of Ikena from many of the campus residents. "Fit for a king," some said, making those who lived there feel as though they were gods. It was the ultimate goal, the home of dreams, at least for those who ever dreamed of living on a college campus.

Initially, I envied them, but I came to accept that I might never live in such awesome conditions, since they cost much more to rent than the regular dorms on campus. Instead, I saved my money for my books and tuition, since coming here was expensive enough in the first place, but worth it.

See, this particular campus is the center of the astronomical universe, and as such is one of the best schools in the world to study astronomy. Having been interested in the subject since I was a small boy, I was prepared to endure whatever academic hardships lay ahead of me in order to fulfill my childhood dream of looking at the stars for a living.

And hardships there have been. The courses were hard enough, the instructors demanding enough, the books heavy enough, and the fellow students competitive enough.

After four years of college (not all students on the five-year plan are stupid), I made a decision. It was unfortunate but necessary that I take summer classes in order to graduate on time. I didn't want to be in school longer than I had to, so I was going to put forth the extra bit of effort to get out of there on time.

So I did. It came time for summer enrollment, and I signed up for a full semester load in the space of less than three months. (Some people speak of suicide in terms of guns, ropes and razor blades; I speak of it in terms of credit load.) I paid my tuition bill in advance because I could do so for once. I made final arrangements to move out of my current dorm room because the term was coming to an end.

And then it hit me: I had nowhere to live over the summer. I spoke to the people in the housing office, and they informed me that Ikena was the only dorm open in the summer, sorry, and would I please fill out an application if I desired to live in the building during that time.

Oh, how the gods were smiling on me! I would be immediately rewarded for the hard work that lay ahead of me, and that made my bleak outlook of the coming summer a bit brighter. I'd have plenty of room, a big, cold box to keep food, a place to cook it, and a balcony. After dealing with the hard courses, demanding instructors, heavy books, and competitive

students, I would have a place to come home and truly relax instead of trying to wrestle through a tiny space where the only food was dry and non-perishable. A quiet place in which I could study without worrying about loud floormates and parties was what awaited me, and I could not wait to inhabit this, the ultimate of domiciles, the pinnacle of campus dorms.

I remember receiving my key from the desk attendant and initialing the needed forms with the RA. At last. The key to a real home.

I took my new key, holding tenderly my passage to peaceful living. I approached my door, inserted the key, and turned the knob.

To say that the apartment did not entirely match my expectations would not be accurate, mostly because I did not really have *expectations*, per se. What I had was a series of impressions, stories, and mental images of what it might be.

However, to say that the apartment did not entirely match my impressions, stories, and mental images would not be accurate, either. What it did was completely violate them.

What I saw with my eyes and what I had seen in my mind did not match at all, and almost immediately I recognized the potential for scientific study.

There were ants and roaches everywhere. The ants especially were *everywhere*. The roaches scattered when I opened the door, but the ants made thin, black lines that spider-webbed around the entire kitchen. It was like a small child had managed to draw very long, crooked lines up and down the walls and across the ceiling with a thin pencil, and I was eager to find the colony.

They seemed to be coming from behind a switch above the filthy, nasty sink, which made me wish for a moment that I was a microbiologist, since I was sure that new species of microbes had developed there, just waiting to be discovered.

The switch must have been what controlled the garbage disposal, which I was surprised to find at all (but, as I reasonably expected, no dishwasher), but I was never given the opportunity to test that hypothesis: my disposal was broken the entire time I lived in that dorm, despite three work orders. I never had the courage to venture inside it to try and repair it; courage is for the Army.

The sink was next to the stove, which itself was another story altogether. It was absolutely caked with grime, which was sadly unidentifiable, since The Hawaii Police Forensics Lab was unwilling to assist me for some reason, citing something about a waste of their resources. (This I did not understand, as no scientific endeavor is a waste of anything.)

None of the burners sat level, preventing almost all boiling of water, and the oven burned about a hundred degrees too hot, depending on the day. Sometimes it was just fifty degrees. Either way, it was impossible to know how much it would overcook those brownies. I had wanted to record its behavior over a period of time to try and extrapolate a predictive algorithm for temperature, but I lacked the instrumentation, and I am not a statistician any more than I am a microbiologist.

Across from my chemically intriguing stove was another item which would occupy much of my curiosity: the refrigerator. Covered completely with a solid coat of ferric oxide, the rusted unit never sealed completely, forcing me to keep the milk and any other real perishables in the very back. Unfortunately, I had no way of compensating for the broken seal, since the temperature adjustment knob was missing. However, this provided me with a true challenge which I never did conquer: the task of thermally imaging the refrigerator to locate any temperature leaks. Although such thermal images would make an insulation salesman dream very happy dreams indeed, creating them is a very expensive process, one which the rent on my new domicile itself prevented.

Disappointed in the kitchen with my initial inability to perform tests and observations to gather solid scientific results for further analysis, I decided to check out my new room. I found everything to be disappointingly in order at first glance, but small things kept cropping up all over the place. Apparently, the previous inhabitants were slobs. Almost every drawer in the room had garbage in it. That's six bureau drawers and four drawers on each of the two desks. Of all those drawers, only three were empty, and this was a happy thing indeed: the only thing a true scientist enjoys more than the ability to accrue knowledge is to find three free gloves, a frozen pizza wrapper, and a giant bag of Christmas lights, all of which worked.

As I pulled out the chair from the desk I claimed as my own, I stepped my bare foot on something rubbery and cold. I looked down and saw a circle which blended in quite well with the carpet.

I stuck my nose down real close to see what it was. It fortunately took little analysis to discover that it was a pile of DRIED VOMIT OH GOD YUCK! (Even *I* have a fully-functional “quease” button.)

Right away I went to the bathroom sink to splash some water on my face to help hold back the slight feeling of nausea I was feeling from that incident. I reached down and immediately stopped myself. Little, black, curly hairs *all over the counter*. Once again, HPD refused to assist me, this time in submitting fiber samples for DNA and biological profile matching.

Ok, maybe the shower. I opened the door to the shared toilet and shower room and the stench of uric acid and ammonia (the main components of urine which so strongly stimulate the olfactory nerves) almost knocked me to the floor, once again triggering my quease button.

Obviously, this was not the dorm room I thought it would be. No, it was much, much more, and I worried very much for the success of my studies, for I knew that I would be spending a majority of my time in the curious pursuit of knowledge of my new home.

Not Alone

The more I extolled the wide variety of scientific study afforded me by my new apartment, both to the powers that be and to anyone that would listen, the more I realized that there were other students with opportunities similar to mine. Granted, I moved into what might be the most intellectually stimulating dorm in the history of the world, but many students had moved into similar living quarters on campus.

The scientist within me again dominated my train of thought, and it occurred to me to investigate this highly intriguing phenomenon. How many were there? Might there be another apartment on campus which I might like even more to live in? How many (admittedly backward) students actually disliked such clearly brain-enhancing conditions?

In a randomized, Ikena-centric study, I found that there were far more students that were very displeased with their rooms than there were students who were content.

I went door-to-door during two class days, ultimately getting over 100 residents to rate their refrigerator, stove, bathroom, and living quarters. Averaging the data together doesn't make the dorms sound

as wonderful as they actually are: collectively, the residents rated their stove and overall living quarters as “below average” and their refrigerator and bathroom as “average.” However, of the 108 respondents, an astounding 17% rated at least one of the four items as “unusable,” 38% rated at least one item as “extremely poor,” and almost two-thirds rated all four items as “below average” or worse. My favorite respondent, though, was an RA, who rated her refrigerator as the best of the four at “poor.” Apparently, there were many apartments like mine, though I was thankful to find that I did indeed live in the one best suited to my natural curiosity about things.

Each respondent had the opportunity to enter individual comments at the end of each simple questionnaire, enhancing my research with their own conclusions. Many expressed a general discontent, such as one that says, “Bathroom needs remodeling,” or another that asks, “When will our kitchen be retiled?” Some even went as far as to express disgust with the apartment (which surprised me): “Everything in bad shape. When will anything get fixed? Do they fix things here?” and “Windows broken and major pest control problem; I feel like I live at the YMCA” were the most humorous for me to read.

However, there are some truly scary comments in my pile of questionnaires, comments on conditions that even I would not find pleasing, and oddly, it is these that are stated in the most matter-of-fact tones of all the comments. (It is these comments, stated with such calm objectivity, that remind me what I ultimately want to be as a scientist someday.) “Stove electrocutes us and fridge leaves massive piles of water;” “Doorknob is broken, so does not lock;” “Window louvers openable from outside.”

The fact that such safety issues remain unresolved is disconcerting, to say the least. Should these problems not be immediately addressed? Why isn't the residents' safety and security the university's number-one concern?

Ultimately, the question remains as to whether any of these problems will be addressed at all. As long as the dorms do not present any major safety risks, why spend the money to repair anything at all? Unfortunately, I am not a politician either, and so lack the insight to answer such questions. Perhaps someone with trepidation similar to my own can tackle this problem.