

## Slice of MIT Podcast | Community at MIT

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[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

**ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to the Slice of MIT Podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

**RIMA:** Housemasters are really awesome. And so they do all sorts of cool events. There's elevensies around finals, and then we do a very fancy Valentine's Day dinner and senior sendoff brunch. Around Easter there's a non-denominational plastic ovoid hunt.

**HOST:** At MIT, you're guaranteed housing for four years, which means that unlike other universities, MIT has a robust and at times storied dorm culture. Just don't call them dorms. MIT students live on campus and off and live in groups that are made up of halls, houses, towers, campuses, gates, fraternities, and sororities. But no matter where students live, a sense of community follows. Sometimes that sense of community blossoms around the specific floors of a living group, like in Burton Conner, as student Madiha Shafquat explains.

**MADIHA SHAFQUAT:** Conner two is English. Conner three is Irish. Conner four are Pirates. Conner five are Velociraptors. And then on B1.

**HOST:** Or community can mean a shared experience of a once in a lifetime moment, like when alumnus Cliff Weinstein got a big name act for an encore performance at his Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity House back in the 1960s.

**CLIFF WEINSTEIN:** You know the four seasons, right? There's a movie about them right now. They were right here at MIT.

**HOST:** In this podcast, we'll explore stories of life at MIT outside of the classroom. We'll hear tales of celebratory grape juice in New House, scooter hockey at Simmons, and management lessons that alumnus Drew Houston learned at Phi Delta Theta.

**DREW HOUSTON:** If you're paying attention, it's like this amazing Petri dish for management.

**HOST:** Stay with us.

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When you're living so close together, community at MIT can often mean friends that become family. And for alumnus Clinton Blackburn, his New House family joined him to celebrate his own family becoming larger with the birth of his niece. It was a moment Clinton couldn't be there for a person, but could celebrate with his MIT family.

**CLINTON BLACKBURN:** I was not there to witness her birth or to be with my family when she was born. But my way of celebrating was I ordered a few pizzas for New House two. Not the whole dorm. It's a lot of people. But ordered a few pizzas, went to Star Market, and got a few bottles of Welch's sparkling grape juice. So that was our champagne and fancy meal was pizza and sparkling grape juice, and it was great.

**HOST:** You may have noticed that Clinton mentioned New House two. That's a section of the New House dorm. Like several other dorms on campus, New House is home to smaller communities within the larger dorm. These communities include Chocolate City, Spanish House, and I House, as well as the more practically named, New House two, three, and four. Madiha, who we mentioned earlier, lives in another dorm set up in a similar way, Burton Conner. And we pick up with her as she continues to give us the lay of the land in this community.

**SHAFQUAT:** Conner four are Pirates, Conner five are Velociraptors, and then on B1, it's the B1 boners. The B2, I forget what they are. I forget what B2 is. I think it's like B2 Legit To Quit. The Burton Third Bombers, which I'm sure you've heard about. The B4 Players and then the B5 not entirely sure what they are. It's varying degrees of commitment to the floor theme.

**HOST:** Beyond Burton Conner's commitment to floor nomenclature, there is a commitment to an inclusive community, which starts before first year students even move in, something that was important to Madiha.

**SHAFQUAT:** When you first come, you have this whole week of rex where you get to choose your dorm. And then after that you have floor rush, in which you actually get to choose your floor.

**HOST:** Allow me to jump in and explain that rex is short for residence exploration, which is where students get to, well, explore. Explore the residences of MIT before choosing one that might be right for them. No random assignments here. Students at MIT actually get a say on where they'll be living at MIT.

**SHAFQUAT:** You get to go around and have one last look at all the dorms and then look at all the floors and

really choose a place where you think that you really click with the people and you think you're going to be comfortable.

**HOST:** For Madiha, who grew up in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, this clicking sometimes meant learning more about American culture from her floor mates.

**SHAFQUAT:** Coming to MIT was just a complete culture shock. But I think I benefited a lot from it. And there's definitely a lot of diversity on my floor, especially in my living group in Burton Conner and at MIT in general, just meeting people from different backgrounds. It's definitely given me perspective.

**HOST:** And as floor mates turn into family, the family style teasing comes in too.

**SHAFQUAT:** I make a lot of fun of my suitemates for how he chooses to store food in Ziploc bags and just small things like that, which I think are just really interesting, but very characteristic of where you grew up and how you grew up.

**HOST:** Learning from others is also a big part of community at MIT. Sometimes the lessons are deep and impactful, like learning about different cultures. And other times the lessons involve laundry. The latter is true for alum Drew Houston. While managing his fraternity, Phi Delta Theta, Drew found himself locked in a laundry stalemate with his brothers. The Dropbox founder and CEO took it all as a lesson in management.

**HOUSTON:** So we had a sort of a communal washing machine. And one day, yet again, someone had taken my wet clothes and instead of putting them in the dryer, put them in the cubbies.

**HOST:** You know, that classic scene in the laundromat or dorm laundry room where someone removes your clothes from the washer and places theirs in. Only they don't intend to dry your clothes for you, just move them out of the way.

**HOUSTON:** So I thought it'd be really great to educate the house about the importance of having a proper system for this.

**HOST:** So he wrote an email.

**HOUSTON:** 10 page masterpiece of an email informing everyone of their civic duty and all the repercussions if they don't follow along.

**HOST:** Stop me if you know how this one ends up.

**HOUSTON:** Now, what they responded with, I can't actually-- [LAUGHS] that is not PG. But sort of all this trial and error, you learn a lot.

**HOST:** Though Drew took the responses in stride and learned a great management lesson, the same good fortune could not be said for his clothes.

**HOUSTON:** They probably threw them outside or something. [LAUGHS] Tough love. Tough love all over.

**HOST:** As with Drew's case, and many others, living in the community sometimes means war. Current student Rima, who is a Simmons Hall resident, explains.

**RIMA:** Currently we're in a war with Maseeh. And so there were all sorts of pranks that were going on. They were trying to steal the ball pit. And the first time they just bagged up all the ball pit balls and put some Maseeh stuff on it and left it in the ball pit room.

**HOST:** That's right. Simmons has a ball pit. And it can be tough to clean. This act of war was meant to be friendly and fun, but also it unintentionally saved Simmons House manager Nika Hollingsworth a big cleaning headache.

**RIMA:** Nika, who kind of takes care of all the facility stuff emailed out and was like, thank you to the people of Maseeh who cleaned that up, because now I can get that room cleaned, and usually I have to pay somebody to do all this bagging. So thank you, Maseeh.

**HOST:** Simmons is MIT's newest dorm and opened in 2002. If you've never seen it, Simmons Hall is pretty big. It's home to around 350 people, is covered in small square windows, and looks like a giant sponge, which is how it earned its nickname of The Sponge. Even though Simmons is a relatively young dorm, it's had no problem forming its own culture and special events.

**RIMA:** Oh my gosh. The most important one. Scooter hockey. We use those little scooters that you have in elementary school. And there's a scooter hockey competition between all of the GRT sections. And so it's round robin where all of dining is transformed into a hockey rink. And you get three people, it's three versus three, and there's a hockey puck and you have tiny little hockey sticks that you hold. It's so crazy, but it's so much fun to watch.

**HOST:** But when they're not busy playing scooter hockey, Simmons residents are busy working on PSETs, just like every other student at MIT.

**RIMA:** Last year I had a tiny room, but it was where everybody gathered. And so we would all stay up

late working on things. There were times when both my roommate and I would go to bed and be done, but there were other people PSETting in our room, just because that was our hangout spot.

**HOST:** Though PSET nights might be memorable, Rima says some of her favorite memories are taking advantage of Simmons' kitchens when no one else is around.

**RIMA:** Other fun times we've had is planning surprise birthday parties for others or friends. So we'll go to another country kitchen and put on some Taylor Swift and bake cakes at absurdly late times in the night so that our friends don't know what we're doing or aren't suspicious that we're not around. That's a lot of fun in terms of late night stories. It's also lots of deep conversations and things that happen when you stay up late working with the same people. But it's a lot of fun.

**HOST:** If you've been paying attention so far, you may have noticed that stories of community at MIT can be pretty random. Paul Kominers, class of 2012, shares a few more random stories. But that's capital R Random.

**PAUL KOMINERS:** There is a thing about Random Hall where sometimes we'll get introduced to somebody and they'll say, how do you know each other? Oh, he's just a random person. You have to say is that a lowercase r random person or a capital R Random person?

**HOST:** But running into Random people didn't stop at MIT for Paul.

**KOMINERS:** In New York City, there was somebody who was doing volunteer data work with another organization in the office space my company was in who was a Random Hall resident, and I was just wearing a Random Hall t-shirt to work that day. And so as I was walking down the hall, she just goes, hold up, hold up. When were you at MIT?

**HOST:** Want to know something else random about the Random community? Let's give Paul a chance to explain why, or why he thinks, one of the names of the groups in Random Hall is Bonfire.

**KOMINERS:** The one that I believe is historically accurate is a number of years back, there was a series of bars in Boston called Dom one, Dom two, and Dom three. And all the people who lived on Bonfire really loved these bars. And they eventually decided that they loved these bars so much, they wanted to name their floor after them. Then they wanted to have their own Dom

establishment. And so they were Dom four. And for reasons I could not begin to imagine how to explain, they spelled it F-O-R-E.

**HOST:** After those original Random Hall occupants graduated, the name didn't mean so much to its current residents. So it was time for a change.

**KOMINERS:** And so they decided to rename it. And they decided that the way they would rename it is they would figure out the thing they could change the big Dom Fore mural on the wall too with the fewest strokes of paint. And that turned out to be Bonfire. And that's what it's been ever since.

**HOST:** But no matter how random life at MIT is, one thing remains constant. The best communities feel like home.

**KOMINERS:** Just any time you walked through, somebody you lived with was there. And there were eight floors in the dorm, and you had a sense of community with everyone. Almost everyone there knew everyone in the dorm. Our housemaster knew everyone by name. And just the idea that you could just go find somebody who you liked and you cared about any hour of the night randomly was really wonderful.

**HOST:** That's a wrap for our stories from alumni and students on community at MIT. We want to hear what community at MIT means to you. Share with us on Twitter [@mit\\_alumni](https://twitter.com/mit_alumni). That's MIT underscore alumni. We look forward to your responses. Thanks for listening.

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