

NEWS

From schoolwork to 'Skol': On-campus bars welcome collegians at Nichols, Holy Cross



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Telegram & Gazette

Published 5:00 a.m. ET April 8, 2022

Nichols College students looking for a place to unwind with an alcoholic drink after classes will soon only have to travel to the Dudley Hill Golf Club where, on the corner where Airport Road becomes Dudley Hill Road, the new Bison Den will be opening.

The Bison Den, which gets its name from the original bar that operated beneath Daniels Auditorium in the 1970s, is now located in the former clubhouse at the golf course.

"People are asking us every single day when it's going to open," said Kayla DeWitt, a student at Nichols and class treasurer for the student government. "People are dying for it to open for good."

While the bar is not open full time, it has hosted events for students and alumni, such as a recent networking event.

Before the drinking age was raised to 21 in 1984, bars on campus were not uncommon at colleges in the region, including the original Bison Den at Nichols, the Pub at College of the Holy Cross and Club 21 at Assumption University.

Although the Pub was the only campus watering hole to survive the shift in laws and culture, colleges have allowed students to host events, such as pub nights at Nichols or making alcohol available at campus events at Assumption.

When the Bison Den does open on an official capacity, students will have a permanent space for pub nights, a monthly event that is currently held at various locations around campus, such as the student center, DeWitt said.

"It's open to all students who are 21-plus to drink. We get three free drinks, and we get a wristband," she said. "You can still go if you're not 21 but you get like an 'X' on your hand."

She said that they were able to have a pub night for senior class only at the new Bison Den.

"It was just nice to get everyone together again, after two years of kind of breaking off into smaller groups, to really kick off senior year so that we can have the last couple of weeks altogether," DeWitt said.

The new Bison Den, which is filled with Nichols College paraphernalia and has the accommodations of a sports pub, is a major departure from the humble beginnings of the original pub.

John Maffeo, like many college students, had an on-campus job while attending Nichols College in the 1970s.

However, while many college students may work at the campus bookstore or a cafeteria, Maffeo worked as a bartender at the original Bison Den.

"At the beginning of my junior year, I got a job as a bartender ... and then about a month into that semester ... the manager at the time had another job on campus, he was a dorm resident and he couldn't have two jobs on campus," Maffeo said.

"That's when I became the manager."

Maffeo, who attended Nichols from 1971 to 1975 and now serves on the Board of Advisors at the school, said that the bar was originally known as the Nichols College Social Club and would not get its new name until February 1975 when students voted for the change.

"Adjacent to the bar in the basement, there were offices for the fire department, so in the fall of 1974, they moved the offices and they let us expand the bar," he said. "We came in on semester break and we knocked the wall down and there were windows there, pretty much doubled the size of the bar."

One of his classmates was a carpenter who was able to help with the construction, he said.

As the bar grew, they were able to get an entertainment license and, as manager, Maffeo would hire small bands to perform.

During that time, the drinking age was 18, meaning that most students at Nichols were able to indulge in the \$0.25 Schlitz, Old Milwaukee, Miller High Life or wine.

"One of my classmates' dads was president of Miller High Life Brewing at the time and we did have a memorable event, which was called Growler Night," he said. "There was help sponsored by Miller ... they gave you a little pail and for \$5, you could fill that up all night."

He said that the classmate's dad came to the event and everyone had "a good time. Everybody was respectful to one another ... we didn't have any incidents."

Due to the student body being from surrounding Northeastern states, including New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, the pub, with its color television and bar snacks, was a popular spot for hockey fans to root for their teams.

"We had good reception. Cable hadn't come in yet, so we had an antenna on the roof," Maffeo said. "We were able to get the Boston station out of the major stations when they had national broadcasts of hockey, baseball, things like that."

The Bison Den, which remained popular in its operation to the 1980s, was then only open intermittently until the early 2000s after the drinking age was raised back to 21.

However, after two decades of trying to recapture the magic of the original, the new Bison Den will once again provide a gathering space for students and alumni.

Maffeo said that while he has not been to the new Bison Den yet, he felt excited that it was returning.

"I was thrilled that it was finally coming back...I felt great," he said.

Like Nichols, College of the Holy Cross also had a small underground bar for students in the basement of the Hogan Campus Center known simply as "The Pub."

The pub was located in a "green sweaty box," said Jeremiah "Chip" O'Connor, who graduated from Holy Cross in 1983 and who now works as the director of auxiliary services for the college.

"The area that was the original pub was a bowling alley when the building was built, so they took all of that out and they put the pub in," O'Connor said. "We used to have bumper stickers that said the pub was 'More than just a big, green sweaty box.' "

O'Connor said that the pub was open seven days a week and that there was always some type of entertainment.

"Back in 1983, bands weren't as expensive, so you could afford them," O'Connor said. "We had a lot of live music down there and stuff like that."

During his senior year, O'Connor said he worked as a student tech adviser and would help set up equipment in the pub every weekend.

A memory O'Connor looks back on fondly was when the Cape Cod Traveling All Stars, a three-piece band, performed at the pub.

"They were just wonderful entertainers," he said. "They were a lot of fun."

He said it was a space that, when students were done studying, could come down to listen to the jukebox and play shuffleboard, pool or video games.

"Arcade video games were the thing because you didn't have home systems, so people would definitely spend a lot of quarters, that's for sure," O'Connor said.

He said that while the pub did not make a lot of money, it was viable and provided a spot for students to get cheap beer and not have to worry about having a designated driver.

There was no hard liquor at the pub, O'Connor said, just boxed wine or beer, such as Bud Light or Miller High Life.

The pub still exists in the basement of the Hogan Center in the Crossroad dining hub, although it only serves beer on tap or wine to students 21 and older on Thursday nights at Pub Nights.

"It used to be Tuesday night on campus, then we were asked by the city this fall if we would consider Thursdays instead," O'Connor said. "That's a night students traditionally go out anyway, so as a way of kind of splitting up the crowds ... we moved on Thursdays."

During the fall Pub Nights were moved outside to a tent to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19, he said.

However, as the weather got colder Pub Nights returned to the basement of the Hogan Center where, after 9 p.m., the Pub is transformed back into something that somewhat resembles its past life.

"They've done things like trivia night in the Pub itself, which is a big thing now with college kids, and they'll do live music or a DJ," he said. "We have a couple of bigger TVs, so they'll have games on or something like that."

He said recently students gathered to watch the women's basketball team in the tournament.

Pub Nights are a tradition that students have been involved in since the drinking age was raised to 21 and although younger students cannot partake in it yet, it is something they can look forward to in their upperclassmen years.

Outside of Pub Nights, the Pub is open to students daily until 7 p.m. where they can get food, such as salads and grain bowls, O'Connor said.

Assumption University used to also have a watering hole on campus known as "The Pub" that bounced locations a couple of times between the basement of Founders Hall, a male residence hall, and the basement of Desautels Hall, a female residence hall, said Melanie Demarais.

"When I got there, they had closed down the bar in the basement of Founders Hall and moved into the basement of a female residence hall," Demarais said. "When our Dean of Students came in, he was like, 'I don't think that's a good idea,' so we closed that after the first year."

She said it moved back to Founders Hall but was shut down again after about a year because the president of the university did not like it.

"We had a group of students petition us and say, 'We're responsible adults ... This is our business plan, this is what we'd like to do. We'd like to call it 'Club 21' because it would only be students 21 years of age and older,'" Demarais said.

She said the group was given permission to open Club 21 in Hagan Center in the snack bar and that they were responsible for ensuring that it ran properly.

However, financial issues forced it to close shortly after its opening.

A second group of students pitched the idea of reopening it and Demarais said they did "a great job."

"In the 1980s, in the two iterations that I saw of bars on our campus that were student-run but reviewed by the administration, it was only open Friday and Saturday," Demarais said.

The second iteration, although short-lived, having closed back down by the end of the 1980s, was a place for professors and administrators to come and mingle with students outside of class, she said.

"It was positive role modeling for students and it forged some really great friendships as a result," Demarais said.

She said that a combination of students losing interest and financial issues led to the ultimate and final demise of Club 21.

Unlike the Bison Den and pub at Holy Cross, Club 21 would set up and tear down the nights it was open.

"During the day, it was the snack bar ... and at night time on Fridays ... the student staff would take over the back of the snack bar, and operate the bar from there on," Demarais said. "They had to break it down at night and it had to look like the snack bar for the next morning, so it was really kind of rented space."

Demarais said that, in addition to a lack of student interest and the bar struggling to make money, the school administration became uninterested and uncomfortable with having a bar on campus.

"The whole movement of the Mothers Against Drunk Drivers ... became very strong at the time as well and just, in terms of the culture in the country, I think people were like, 'Why are you doing this?'" Demarais said.

While Assumption may not have an on-campus bar anymore, the university does still serve drinks at student events or performances.

And although a date has not been formally announced, when the Bison Den does finally open officially, students will be able to come and go whenever they want.

The building is still undergoing renovations but DeWitt said that they have discussed having a pool table, a dance floor and a karaoke machine.

"I just think it's a really great place for everybody to be able to get to know everybody," DeWitt said. "Even if they don't play the same sport as you or they're not in your direct friend group."