

WHO'S HOSTING?

Parties at SJS are so engineered and controlled that they have lost any air of danger or rebellion. In the name of safety, have we sacrificed a quintessential rite of passage?

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Sources denoted with only first names and gender-neutral pronouns have requested to remain anonymous.

Everyone expects an after-party. Brett expresses the shared sentiment among students when no one offers up their house: “It’s wild that nobody volunteered to host until the day before,” Brett said. “I mean, it’s our Senior Prom. There has to be a grade-wide ‘after’ – otherwise it defeats the point of prom. Small parties are so pointless – invite everyone or invite no one. Just open up your backyard and deal with it.”

THE ART OF THE PARTY

“I love large parties. They’re so intimate.”
Jordan Baker, *The Great Gatsby*

Preparing a house for a party is akin to readying a medieval castle for battle. The process of hosting begins weeks in advance, when peer pressure reaches a fever pitch and someone with a suitable house – and amenable parents – agrees to offer up their backyard. Thus begins the preparation. Relocate the pets, reorganize the furniture, ready the coolers. Even the optimal number of trash cans must be considered. Not that having trash cans helps with cleaning (hosts report finding copious amounts of trash on the ground), but fragile objects in the line of fire must be cleared.

Parties come with a hefty price tag. Even a “bare minimum” party requires trash bags, paper for the bathroom floor and snacks for close friends, according to Asher, who is one of the few repeat hosts.

The price goes up substantially if security is hired to keep out party-crashers. Contracting off-duty River Oaks Police officers is a common choice for party security, costing around \$80 an hour.

Some hosts request donations from classmates to cover their expenses. Asher will spend more on a party, depending on how much they receive. For an end-of-year party, they crowdsourced over \$1,000, half of which went to hiring a pair of private investigators to act as security.

Most hosts, often at the insistence of their parents, provide partygoers with food. Whether it’s Raising Cane’s or Domino’s, it never ends up in the trash cans, but that doesn’t mean it’s eaten.

“I’ll find pizza in the weirdest places,” Skye said, “in our fountain, in our pool and hidden behind plants.” Choosing just the right time to announce a party is a delicate art.

“Usually, you want to do it 48 hours before because you don’t want the party to be huge, and you don’t want people from other schools to find out,” Brooks said.

Time and place spread largely through word of mouth. A host will tell a few close friends. Then, the details will either end up on a class GroupMe or circulate via text.

The day of the party, some hosts convene with a few close friends before the hordes converge.

“It’s like the calm before the storm – except the calm is way more fun because you’re blasting music with just your close

friends,” Ellis said.

For parties that follow big events like Homecoming, Cotillion or Prom, hosts face the terrifying prospect of impatient guests arriving before they do.

Ellis, who hosted a Cotillion after-party, watched helplessly as their classmates boarded party buses and set out to the party while Ellis’s bus was the last to arrive. Ellis frantically checked SnapMap with mounting panic as 180 classmates arrived.

Throughout the party, Ellis tried to appease a disgruntled neighbor by turning the speaker volume down, but each time an oblivious guest would crank the music back up again.

At 2 a.m., while cleaning up, they found trash smushed into the ground and flower pots – right next to a trash can. The outdoor furniture was mortally wounded. Ellis’s parents were not amused.

“I’m not allowed to host ever again.”

Even with robust preparation, the quality of a party can vary wildly.

“There is an optimal backyard space-to-people ratio,”

Tatum said. “If you don’t hit that ratio, your party is gonna suck.”

With all the work that goes into a party, most hosts find it nearly impossible to enjoy themselves.

“I love being able to take one for the team and give people a place to hang out, but I feel like I’m responsible for people,” Mikey said. “I want to have fun – and I can’t have fun if I’m worrying about everybody else.”

Brooks puts it more bluntly: “I hate hosting.”

UNDER (PEER) PRESSURE

“...they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.”

Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby*

None of this, of course, would be possible without peer pressure. The most common method is pestering a person until they break.

According to Mikey, everyone will choose a desirable host to harass. “Once, I got pressured by 20 people to host,” Mikey said. “And then I started thinking, ‘What if no one hosts? That would suck.’ So I did.”

Tatum says that if peers know that someone’s parents will let them host or they have hosted before, they will target you.

“Then it’s in your own hands how much you want to harass your parents or how much you want to blame them for your inability to host, when the truth is, you just don’t want to,” they said.

A few key factors determine one’s desirability as a host:

Prime location.

Chill parents.

Good backyard.

Skye often gets asked to host, especially after football games due to their house being in a convenient location. “I

feel obliged to host, but it’s half other people and half me,” they said.

“I will sometimes host so that people will stop bothering me,” Brooks said. “I wouldn’t host if I didn’t feel like I had to. I have a good house, and I feel like I owe it to the people.”

If there is an announcement that someone is hosting that weekend, “for that week, everybody treats you like Jesus,” Tatum said.

Once they agreed to host a Cotillion after-party, Tatum said they had “never seen such an overt display of people-pleasing for the sake of getting what they want.”

Although Tatum frequently experiences peer pressure to host the next party, they credit their fortitude to their “strong-willed” personality. One time as host, they limited the party to just their grade. All week, people came up to them and tried to guilt-trip them into allowing other grades to attend. But they stood firm.

“With hosting, you have to be resolute in your decisions,” Tatum said. “When you’re dealing with high volumes of kids, it’s important to be sure that you know what you’re doing. And you won’t let anybody else change that.”

MAINTAINING CONTROL

“It takes two to make an accident.”
Jordan Baker, *The Great Gatsby*

Casey spent hours petitioning their parents to host a grade-wide after-party. They finally relented two days before the event. Casey immediately texted all their friends to spread the word.

The next day, Casey informed their friends that they could not host. In under 24 hours, other parents had called and texted Casey’s parents with hosting horror stories.

While Casey was sure nothing bad would happen, their family had not planned on hiring security. They had even talked to their neighbors to ensure that the police would not be called, and they assured their parents everyone would stay in the backyard and behave themselves.

Alas, the party would not go on, so the search for a host returned to square one.

Legal and safety concerns govern much of the logistics for a St. John’s party. Taking a page from cotillion and graduation party venues, hosts will often require guests to sign waivers with the intention of protecting themselves from legal consequences.

However, waivers are not a legal catch-all. For starters, just because there is a signature does not mean it is a parent’s. If the signature is forged, the waiver is legally meaningless. Even if a guest’s parent signed the waiver, if someone is injured or dies as the result of illegal or inadequately supervised activity at the event, attorney Josh Schaffer (‘95) doubts that the waiver would protect the host from civil liability.

And, valid or not, waivers provide no protection against potential criminal charges.

Schaffer, a parent of two Middle School students, participated in a panel discussion last year with St. John’s parents and spoke on the legal issues presented by underage drinking and hosting parties. He notes that, “in addition to parent hosts exposing themselves to legal liability, private security companies and officers could be legally responsible for injuries and damages caused by illegal or inadequately supervised conduct at a party at which they are hired to provide security.”

For history teacher Gara Johnson-West, party culture today is unrecognizable from what she grew up with.

“We were feral,” she said. “I had my car and would just say, ‘I’m heading out, I’ll see you at some point.’ It was so, so different.”

These days, not only do mom and dad know all about the party, but they have to sign a waiver for you to get in.

Even among Houston-area private schools, St. John’s is an anomaly. Students at nearby schools say that safety waivers and hired security are unheard of.

At The Emery/Weiner School, “huge” parties happen once a month, but small-scale hangouts occur most weekends, according to a junior. With half the student population of SJS, most bigger parties tend to include sophomores, juniors and seniors, and “parents aren’t usually involved, but when they are home, they will usually turn a blind eye.”

At Episcopal, the people who host parties have parents “who are the most chill,” an EHS junior said.

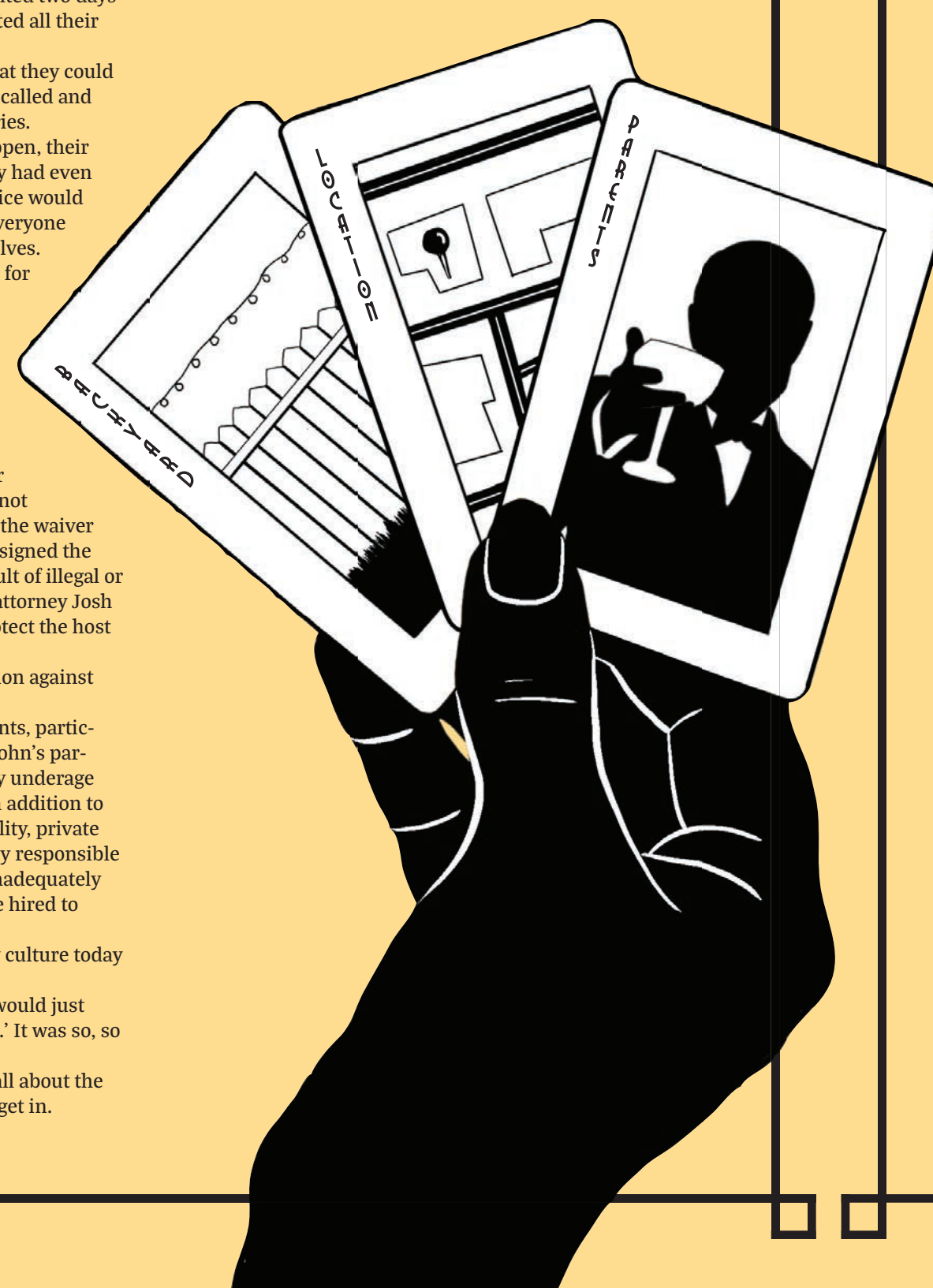
Episcopal grade-wide parties only occur after certain big football games and events. Typically, news spreads by word of mouth. A junior sent a grade-wide message in which he called his upcoming party “Project X” based on a 2012 movie in which a house party gets out of hand. EHS students took this joke to an extreme by posting flyers around campus for the party complete with an address and pictures of the host.

Turns out, safety comes at the cost of independence.

As a teacher and the mother of a senior, Johnson-West wants her students to be safe. “However, I do feel there are some issues with that because you don’t develop your autonomy and independence as quickly as we did.”

Johnson-West attributes this lack of independence to a hyper-controlled environment that carries over from an often stressful school culture.

“I think we do a poor job, myself included, of allowing kids to make small mistakes and then experience the consequences,” she said.



TALES FROM THE HOSTS

“People were not invited — they went there.”
Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby*

CANNONBALL

“One of my friends was standing on top of the elevated portion of the pool, the waterfall area. And he jumps in, while my other friend is lying down in the pool on a floatie, and they collide. They were fine. He left and came back four hours later.”

DO NOT JUMP IN THE POOL

“When I told my friends I was hosting, I had one friend who jokingly threatened to jump into my pool, and I seriously told them not to, but he thought that I was also joking. All of a sudden, I hear a huge splashing sound and see him swimming around in my pool in 50-degree weather. I took the phone on aux and recorded an audio respectfully asking no one else to jump into the pool, and it played on the speakers for a few minutes.”

JUST 20 PEOPLE

“My mom told me I could have 20 people over – 150 people showed up. Everyone had less than one inch of square footage, and there were even people sitting on my roof. I hid in my room because I was so stressed out. My mom sent me the security camera footage: it’s a picture of the backyard and everybody is like sardines, and she texted me, in quotes, ‘It will just be 20 people.’”

NOT SO COOL

“Once, someone jumped into the pool covered in whipped cream. My parents were not pleased, to say the least.”

FROM BAD TO WORSE

“Some random guy showed up at my party. He took my phone right out of my hand and threw it into my pool. I had to jump into the pool and get it, but it sadly broke, and my parents grounded me for a month.”