'Corner for a Dreaming Monkey' offers spot for relaxation

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Take a 70-foot chunk of space in the Hanszen College attic, burdened with a random assortment of old bedsprings, boxes and covered with a not-so-thin layer of dust and grime, and in less than six months transform that space into a place with soft music and softer lights, with tables and chairs for relaxing, and a stage and piano for performing. Change it to a place where students and faculty members can come to relax, to talk, or to dream.

To make, for Rice, "A Corner for a Dreaming Monkey," the Hanszen Coffee House.

The idea for a coffee house in Hanszen first began last October with Warren Skaaren, who took charge of construction and operation.

"The idea of a coffee house in the attic was a bit unbelievable at first, because things up there were just such a mess," says Skaaren. But a crew was dispatched to clean and mop and sweep, and people formulated ideas and suggestions throughout the fall.

Fourteen tables were constructed out of large telephone cable spools, and the Buildings and Grounds Department provided 150 old classroom chairs, which were made livable by cutting off the desks and an inch or two from the back legs.

"The pace of construction slowed a bit until just before Christmas, when the cabinet dismissed early one night to help us paint the walls and ceiling," says Skaaren. "Then gradually we began to get help from more areas of the college than before. We also got many good suggestions from Mrs. Katherine Brown of the Fine Arts Department."

Two partitions were constructed out of Michelob beer bottles, and the ends of the coffee house were closed off with stained panelling. The same panelling was used to renovate the bar, which was purchased in a junk shop for $35.

Buildings and Grounds extended air conditioning into the attic, and did the basic electrical wiring. "But all other work, including the sound and light systems, was done by students," declares Skaaren. "In fact, most of the work was done in the last three weeks, after we decided on the Ronald-leet weekend opening."

Three movable stages, with a movable light bar to illuminate them, were constructed and placed at one end. The college piano was moved into the attic, as were the speakers formerly used to provide music during mealtime. Two coffee urns, a Christmas gift to the college from the Sasses, are used to prepare refreshments, which include such exotic mixtures as Cappachini and Te Naranji.

One of the most distinctive features of the coffee house, a color organ whose lights dim and flash according to the intensity and tone of the sound system, was constructed by junior Bob Wilkinson, and lends a conversation-stopping burst of color.

There are future plans to add a room to be used as an art gallery and display area, as well as a ladies room and a rug to cover the concrete floor.

The "Corner for a Dreaming Monkey" opened to standing-room-only crowds last weekend. "We had 100 people for our grand opening Friday night, including faculty and administration officials, and over 300 Saturday afternoon and evening," says Skaaren. The coffee house is open to all Rice students and all faculty members.

"Anyone anywhere on campus who feels like going up to play the guitar or piano or to read poetry is most welcome. And any student or faculty member who has an idea or program that he feels could be presented in the coffee house should contact me."

The coffee house in the attic of Hanszen College offers to members of the Rice community a place for fellowship, a place for students to show off their initiative and industriousness, and then sit back and enjoy it, a place for spending the not-too-common and too-often-wasted leisure hours. Or as Skaaren puts it, "at Rice we have lost an attic, but we have gained a place where it's proper to do the most human of all things, to dream."