



Laughter, *fun* and a little bit of trouble

By Tori Tragis

It was the whooping and hollering that first made her get up from her desk and look outside. Whooping and hollering at 2 a.m. on a college campus generally indicate that something nefarious is going on, or at least something that merits investigation by a Responsible Person.

On this early October night, that Responsible Person was Ashleigh Strange, a resident assistant in UAF's Cutler Apartment Complex on the Fairbanks campus. One of three RAs at Cutler, she was on duty that night, so it was she who opened her office door in time to behold several individuals who had freed themselves of even the most rudimentary of garments and were racing through the complex's courtyard and down the hill.

Strange is a professional. She's a student, true, but three years of working with fellow students as a peer advisor has taught her many things, including the fact that

public nudity is not acceptable, nor does it comply with university policy. She had to go after them, stop them and tell them to put their clothes back on.

As she chased the garment-less group, it occurred to her: *What will I do if I catch them?* She knew how to deal with violent intruders. She didn't tolerate underage drinking and had learned to write an incident report, but how to apprehend streakers was not part of her training.

She didn't quite know what to do with a bunch of naked people. "They were all standing under one street lamp, and I was standing under another street lamp. Then they all just took off

running again. Fortunately, I couldn't really see anything," she says, laughing. "They were too far away for me to catch them, and I just thought, 'Whew, won't have to deal with that!'" She laughs again.

To be perfectly clear, Ashleigh Strange does not shirk her duties. (And really, who *wouldn't* have been relieved?) She is the consummate professional, although she's really "just" a student, a journalism major, and all of 21 years old.

Making the connection

Jamie Napolski works with freshmen in the residence halls at UAF. She supervised Strange when Strange was an assistant in Moore Hall, and they still work on projects together.

"She is a great RA," Napolski says firmly. "She is not intimidated by anybody or anything. 'Hi, I'm Ashleigh.' You hear that all the time. She can talk about herself or really listen. There is something charismatic about her that just draws people in."

Napolski directs the EDGE program (see sidebar on page 19), which helps freshmen adjust to and succeed in university life. Strange, she says, perfectly complements that goal with all students, regardless of class standing.

"I think that there is something inside her that says, 'I understand what it's like maybe to be alone, and I'm not going to be alone. And I'm not going to allow students I know to be alone,'" Napolski says.

Part of an RA's job is to help students make connections with each other. They organize activities throughout the year, some with an educational twist, others purely social.

Strange fully understands that it's all too easy for students to isolate themselves. Raised in Fairbanks, she was homeschooled from the fifth grade on.

"Everything I know about high school is from the movies," she laughs. She recalls that moving into Moore Hall as a freshman resulted in "significant culture shock."

"At first I wanted to be a hermit but now I realize it's a huge networking opportunity. I like being out and about."

UAF alumnae featured in this story: Jamie Napolski, '01; Jane Weber, '88, '91



Pushing boundaries

She got her first taste of being out and about among students working as a desk attendant checking student IDs in Lathrop Hall. She admits she “totally played the freshman card,” seeking pity from the older students, some of whom were aggravated at having to prove their student status. The wide eyes and mildly befuddled demeanor worked, and Strange found she had a talent for enforcement with a smile. The next two years she spent as a resident advisor in Moore Hall before moving into Cutler this past fall.

“We have a saying when we are dealing with a noise complaint,” she says. “Where there’s laughing, there’s fun, and where there’s fun, there’s trouble.”

Strange may have an aptitude for working with people but, like many things, it’s a talent that needs nurturing and development. She and the other resident advisors (there are between 40 and 45 on the Fairbanks campus in any given semester) undergo two weeks of training at the start of the fall semester and a one-week review that kicks off the spring term.

Some topics are seemingly mundane — like how to avoid slips, trips and falls — while others, like date rape and alcohol abuse, are more serious if more rare. All of them are important because any of them can affect a student’s experience and success in college.

One of the more popular activities during training is called BCD, for “behind closed doors,” according to Napski. Assistants role-play with each other and with professional staff, learning how to confront their fellow students on minor infractions and major problems.

Many people quail at the thought of confronting others but the RAs love it, Napski says, including Strange. “She just thoroughly enjoys pushing her own boundaries, along with wanting to do a good job.”

Working with students is something of a calling. They can be unpredictable, especially between sundown and sunup. That unpredictability translates into late nights, interrupted sleep and sometimes emotional encounters. Strange handles it with tact, humor and a firm understanding of her primary responsibility.

“I’m a stickler for rules,” she explains. “A lot of people think we want to bust everybody. The way I look at it, I want to keep everyone safe.”



Tori Tragis, '94, '99, is a writer and editor for UAF Marketing and Communications.



It all starts here



Education. Development. Growth. Experience.

Students expect those things when they go to college but sometimes reality falls short. Classes are harder, professors more demanding. Maybe they feel a little intimidated, overwhelmed, and the experience might not be all that great. It might even make them want to leave school.

The EDGE program helps freshmen adjust to college life. What started as an experiment on one floor of Skarland Hall in 1999 has since grown to a program that fills all of Moore and Lathrop halls. Nearly 4,700 students have gone through it. Participation is mandatory for all freshmen who are 20 years old or younger, living on campus and carrying 20 or fewer credits.

Jamie Napolski, EDGE's coordinator since 2005, says many freshmen need help making the transition from high school to college. Putting everyone together under one roof (or two) creates cohesion and community, which Napolski and her staff further encourage by offering programs that build relationships.

"For students to want to stay in school you have to have your connectors," she says. "You have to know somebody" who can be a friend with whom to study or socialize.

Napolski's mission is keeping students in school. "We want to provide you the social and educational interests to fill up your time."

Jane Weber teaches a developmental math course in Moore Hall as part of EDGE. "It's really nice with the EDGE program because there are peer mentors, there are tutors up there, they bring in refreshments every now and then. They really work to make everyone feel welcome, not just the students in the halls," Weber says.

"I think it's a very positive program for fostering student success. And I think these classes work out really well because of the mix of students."

Some activities are largely educational, others more social. They go a long way toward helping students feel comfortable, happy and energized.

Sam Tinoco is a freshman music major from Kodiak.

"It gives students opportunities to get up and do things," he says. "At the last dance I got to go up with my band. It was cool that Jamie gave us the opportunity to perform."

"These programs let us show our talents. They let us show ourselves to the world."



Strange and Sammie Johnson host the weekly Strange Musicals Alive and Kicking radio show on the student radio station, KSUA. Johnson is also an RA at Cutler Apartment Complex. Radio station photos by Maureen McCombs.



Learn more about Ashleigh Strange and being a resident assistant at www.uaf.edu/aurora/.