Princetoniana Committee

Butler Apartments Oral History Project

Transcript of Recorded Interview

with Christine Blumauer, April 2014
CHRISTINE BLUMAUER:

I'm Christine Blumauer. My husband is Sebastian and he is in [the Department of] Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering working, actually, with the program on science and global security, which is also affiliated with the Woodrow Wilson School. He joined Princeton as a PhD student in the summer of 2012, and is expected to finish in 2017. So, he arrived during summer, 2012 and spent a year at the Graduate College. When he came to visit Princeton, he saw Butler and it was clear from the beginning that we would move there, because it looked like a very nice place to live as a couple. The most inexpensive as well, actually, on campus. I stayed in Paris for one more year because I was working. We’re international students from France. It’s not easy in terms of work permits and visas, so we had a long distance relationship for about one and a half years, which wasn’t fun at all.

So, Sebastian moved in [to Butler] in summer, and I think, apart from our table in the living room that he bought in a proper shop and the bed we got for $100, all of the rest of the things were picked up next to trash containers because he arrived when people were moving out. I think that’s a recurrent thing that happens in Butler. So, I joined him in October, and it was still so beautiful, the weather was great. I wasn’t doing so well at the time, health-wise, so it was a big relief, actually, to arrive in Princeton, and to be in Butler, because it’s such a quiet place. And when it’s sunny warm, it’s just -- I would sit in the sun and just relax, and it was really, really good. And it was great to set up the place. I had to rearrange the furniture, because Sebastian hadn’t done it in the best way,
actually. I’m a bit of an organizing person so this was fun to do. When you come from Paris, a small Butler unit looks so big to you, because we have two bedrooms, and such a big kitchen, and so many closets. I think, for Americans, sometimes, it seems pretty small, but it really depends from where you come.

I did a lot of sewing when I arrived. A friend of mine, Anna, who also lives in Butler, helped me sew curtains, which was a first for me, and it was fun. I think for us it was kind of important, because it’s the place where I got back together with my husband, after a long-term, long distance relationship for quite a while. So, that was important. I think for us, it’s very international. Like when I tried to figure out measuring the size for my curtains, I was like, oh, my God, feet, inches, what is this? What is this? Or, you know, buying new sheets for the bed, and, like, oh, my God, our duvet covers come from Europe, but they’re not the same size as they are here. Same for the pillows, so it was a lot of unexpected little things that you would really have to consider. But, actually it was fun rather than annoying.

And so, yeah, Butler is… for me it’s, like, looking at the squirrels in the morning when I’m having coffee. They come and sit on the porch and feel like they’re at home. This morning, actually, we had our first coffee on our porch, and it was so great. The sun coming in, and it was still very quiet. It seems like on weekends, people sleep longer, way longer than during the week. Thank God! I think for me, it’s the quietness that is very, very important in this place and at the same time, you feel people are living there, it’s not like quiet, no life, but peaceful life.
So now, [that it’s spring] we could actually turn the heater down. This was very noisy during the winter; that’s one thing I’m definitely not going to miss. I think Julie mentioned it also in the [PAW] article, that she loves her clotheslines. I find it so convenient as well, actually. I think that since Butler has existed, actually, these lines, maybe they have been replaced with newer ones over time, but it’s just so convenient actually. I lived in a house when I was younger, but for the past years, I lived in apartments, and in big cities, so just going out and being on the grass is just -- yeah, it feels really good.

It’s friendly, I would say most of the time. I’m the social chair of the committee, so I interact a lot with the other committee members. We organized a Chinese New Year event, which is kind of a traditional event that has been ongoing for years in Butler, and it was so easy. I was in charge of finding the caterer and all, and applying for funding. But on the day of the event, so many people from the committee just came in and started helping, and it was so spontaneous and fluid. I had not expected it to be so easy, actually. So, that’s the thing; I think this is where you also feel this community spirit that people tell you about; if something’s going on, people are committed, I would say. If they say they’ll come and help, you can count on it, so that’s pretty nice.

The Chinese New Year [event] was a dinner, actually, with music, and it was in the community room. Spontaneous things would happen more with people that were friends. I look forward to our barbecue, actually, and having people over for that. Then in terms of more things that concern the entire community, we’re going to have a summer kickoff
party early May, so that’ll be outside, hopefully, if the weather is good. So, these are moments where the entire community has the possibility to come together and mingle.

Sebastian loves it [Butler] probably for the same reasons as I. It’s just the sun, the possibility of sitting out on our porch and having coffee, and just spending time outside so easily when the weather is good, and having barbecues. And yeah, looking at the squirrels, looking at the nature, the trees now blossoming. And, you really have an Indian summer here, like, very sunny September, October, and beautiful colors. So it’s just a good place to re-energize.

Sebastian studied at Butler in the fall a lot. Also because, well, I wasn’t doing so well, so he was staying to check on me, and to be close to me, and then he was working for his generals. So, the best place was to actually be at home, and in a quiet environment. Now, he’s actually working more on campus, which I think is better for us, as well, to have more boundaries between where you work and where you actually live. Because as a grad student, it’s, like, a 24/7 thing, kind of. So, sometimes, as I’m currently not working, and I’m not a grad student, so I’m the one who says, OK, now, a break, please.

I don’t often take the bus, because I like to take my bike, rather than taking the bus, when I’m traveling around campus. You see quite a lot of female students, and I think that there are quite a few that are sharing apartments. So, not only couples, but also singles. Probably in that sense, the spirit has remained the same, in that it’s a place where couples tend to go and live. You have cases where both are grad students, and I would say it’s
more frequent to have a male grad student with a female spouse that is not necessarily affiliated to the University. Although, I think I know two couples where it’s the other way around. One is an American couple, and he works somewhere close by, and she is a grad student. And the other one is an international couple, and so he moved, actually, to be with her here.

The mom group at Butler is huge. I’m not a mom but this is something I like very much, actually, even more [now] that the weather’s good again. Like last night, I was doing some stuff, and I was outside, and I would hear kids playing a bit further away. And this is something I enjoy very much. It’s just, you know, generations that are mingling. There are a lot of moms, a lot, and I think that they meet on Tuesday morning, so the kids play together in the community room, and they chat. Somehow, I never had the opportunity to go. But there is one mom, well, Julie, who is the former social chair and with her I interact. And a friend of mine, she’s pregnant but we don’t know if it’s going to be a Butler baby or a Lakeside baby, because that’s going to depend on when they finish the new buildings.

Butler’s provided a huge community, in the sense that through the [social] committee, I have a lot of interaction with others. Then, I think during the winter, there is less going on, because there are less people outside. So, you feel the community, in the sense that you hear the people living around you, and you also have interactions that can be very casual, you know, when you’re in the laundry room. But I think, to me, what will ultimately be the thing that I’m taking [is] the community spirit with me, definitely,
because I cannot imagine moving to Lakeside and not having a community life, because
this is something that is so present in Butler, even if it’s kind of, you know, slowing down
as people are now already moving out and all. So, the community; I feel it in the sense
that I cannot imagine being in another place without having the possibility of people
interact and organize organically and having a committee that is there to facilitate with
the University and all. But to me, what I’ll take with me is being reunited with my
husband, and enjoying the quietness.

A FINAL NOTE: Christine organized a “Goodbye Butler Social” during Reunions, 2014
and I asked her the following: “This is related, but not exactly. I want you to go on
record telling me why you decided, as social chair of the Butler committee, to create an
open house at Butler during reunions 2014 for graduate alumni to come back and see
Butler one last time.” Her response:
I think because the place has grown on me, kind of. And maybe the fact that I sense the
community; but I haven’t been there for so long, so for example, I couldn’t experience
the community garden, or many events that are going on. But the place grew on me for
all of the reasons I mentioned; the quietness, the kids playing around. And, I think,
because I think this place is just so unique, and it just came. I had the idea, I think,
already in December, or so. I was like, it’s not possible that this place goes away, and
that we don’t try and commemorate it in a way for former residents, former grad students
who know Butler, because maybe they didn’t live there, but they had friends there so they
spent time with them. It just felt like, kind of, a necessity to do something about it.

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