

Fifty years ago, I was a student at college in England. Students enjoyed a tradition called "Rag Week" that took place, annually, in most universities and colleges throughout the land. During that week, students raised money for charities, and many students took the week's activities more seriously than their studies. Each college student council arranged various activities for the entire college, but sometimes it was the fundraising by smaller independent groups of students that were more newsworthy.

I attended college in a small city, Brighton, on the south coast of England. It's city center was a reasonable size that required a large police force and, during Rag Week, they had their work cut out. Here are a few stories about other students, as well as my own participation.

One group's fundraising scheme started among some students from the art college. A friend, Dave, was one of the main instigators. Back then, many privately run barber shops competed for business and, as was traditional, they had red and blue striped barbers' poles fixed to the building over their door. Dave and his friends had noticed one barber in an area that was a little run down. Late one afternoon, they walked into his shop, which delighted him as he had not seen six long haired youths walk into his shop in years. However, Dave's request surprised him, "We want to buy your barber's pole."

The barber's eye brows rose as a confused look crossed his face, "You want what? I thought you all wanted clean cuts."

"No. How much d'you want for the pole?"

"I'm not selling my pole to anyone. Its been hanging there for years."

"How about ten pounds for the pole?"

"Blimey. You want my pole that bad? For a tenner, I'll even get you a screwdriver."

The barber searched around in a cluttered drawer for a minute, and eventually pulled out a rusty screwdriver, "There you go."

Dave handed over ten one-pound notes and asked, "Any chance we can get a receipt?"

Ten minutes later, the students had the six-foot pole in hand and headed towards the downtown. As they walked around, they purposefully made much commotion, drawing attention to themselves and especially to the fact that they had a barber's pole. As the sun set, a police car stopped next to them to enquire about the barber's pole. One officer looked very tired and sullen "OK. Where d'yer get the pole?"

Dave could look so innocent when he wanted. "What do you mean, officer?"

"Don't try that crap on me. Where did you nick the pole from?"

"We bought it earlier from a barber." insisted Dave.

"I bet you can't prove that, can you?"

"Sure." said Dave pulling out the receipt.

Feeling a little frustrated, the policemen drove away while reporting the strange encounter over the radio to the main police station.

Dave and his friends paraded around town, stopping at a few pubs for a drink. Their noise and having the barber's pole caused their near arrest on several more occasions. By mid-evening, the group's antics caused another police patrol car to pull them over.

As soon as the policeman rolled his window down to enquire about the pole, Dave started a plea, "Officer, there is no law against us carrying a pole, which we can prove we bought, around the streets."

Looking skeptically at the group of students, the officer offered, "Well, no there isn't any law, but you sure look suspicious."

Dave tried to reason, "Look, we're just having a good time. We don't want to keep utilizing police resources to check on us: you are the fourth car to stop us this evening. Here's the receipt from the barber to show we did buy it. Can't you tell all of your patrol cars that we're legitimate and to stop wasting your time checking on us?"

The officer radio'ed his chief and suggested broadcasting a bulletin to ignore students with a barber's pole. After some discussion, the chief agreed to do so as he was tired of continuous reports coming in from various patrol cars about students with a barber's pole.

A general notice went out to all police units to ignore any students having a barber's pole. Dave and his group heard the start of the bulletin being relayed to all police cars as the officer drove away. They rushed to a popular pub where a large body of students waited for their news. That unleashed a flood of students across the city at about midnight, stealing every barbers pole that could be easily taken down. The police overlooked every group of students seen walking around with barbers poles, that night.

The following day, the students ransomed the barbers poles back to their rightful owners with the press taking photographs and the police feeling a little used. The students actually raised a decent sum from their outside-the-law endeavors.

Another year, two students from my college decided to stay inside the law, but still raised a modest contribution into the charity fund. Tim and Laurie were physics students and for their practical academic work, they were required to wear white lab coats and, occasionally, protective goggles and gloves.

One morning, in the middle of the work week, they drove to downtown and parked in a side street close to a couple of office buildings. As they were about to leave their car, they put on their white coats, goggles and gloves. Tim and Laurie quickly walked around the corner to the front of a large insurance company's headquarters. Without slowing, they marched straight up to the desk in the lobby.

The guard scowled as he looked them up and down. "Can I help you?"

Tim had a serious expression on his face and with a tone, normally only found in army training camps, he quietly said, "There's been an accident down the road and we need to check everyone for degrees of toxin exposure. We need to speak to the director, immediately – I mean, right now. And don't mention this to anyone until we're finished."

Feeling the intensity of Tim's gaze, the guard picked up a phone, dialed a number, and waited. "Sheryl, this is Tom in the lobby. I got these, er, I suppose they're scientists here and they need to speak to Mr. Janson immediately. If you can break into the meeting, that would be good – its urgent."

Several minutes later, Sheryl exited the elevator and walked across the lobby. Her normal smile transitioned to mild panic when she saw Tim and Laurie, in their protective gear. Tom nodded towards them to confirm they were Sheryl's visitors.

As soon as they settled in Mr. Janson's office, Laurie didn't allow any small talk "We've just had an accident a short distance away and there're fears that a truck's load may have contained biological materials that could have been exposed to the air. We need to check everyone in the offices for exposure to the agent. Do not say anything about the possible exposure – we don't want to cause any unnecessary disturbances."

Mr. Janson immediately contacted all departments to facilitate the check and told his deputy, Miss Dexter, to escort Tim and Laurie around the offices, but to not explain the situation.

When they departed Mr. Janson's office, Laurie leaned close to Tim, "I suggest we take off the goggles and gloves, as we don't want to freak anyone out."

They removed their protective gear and simply walked through the offices wearing their white coats. They acted as if they were facility consultants, checking the air temperature. They occasionally pulled out small devices to check their dials and whisper together, giving the office workers no reason to be concerned.

After they had vacated the building, Laurie made a call to Mr. Janson, "Hi. This is Laurie. Tim and I were just in your offices after the toxin scare."

Mr. Janson sounded concerned "I hope you didn't find any problems that we need to deal with, did you?"

“I would say that we did indeed find a problem, but thankfully for you, this was a rag-week stunt. Nobody requested any identification or credentials when we arrived. I would suggest you think about that detail. However, I was impressed how you immediately responded because you were obviously concerned with your staff’s safety. I’m sure you would prefer this incident not being reported in the local paper, which I am sure will be the case if you were to make a donation to the rag-week fund.”

He chuckled, “That is a relief and I do need to think about tightening our security policies. Thank you for making me think about that and I would appreciate this not reaching the paper. Give me the details of where I can send a check.”

The insurance company willingly made a payment into the charity fund in exchange for nothing being leaked to the local press.

One of the student council’s best known standard rag-week activities was proposed by a local brewery - drink a pub dry. The brewery stocked a pub that had a very large cellar with as much beer as they could, for one evening. Then a huge contingent of students tried to drink everything that the pub could sell. To facilitate the endeavor, additional staff were drafted into the pub for that night. The success of the evening depended primarily on the level of organization in the students. If they could arrange orderly lines to each of the servers, then they stood a better chance of drinking the pub dry than if it was a general melee, trying to get to the bar. Every year, the brewery made a large profit on the evening. They also made a very substantial contribution to the rag-week fund, especially when the students succeeded in the endeavor. Many students did not make class the next day having contributed most of the funds into the prior night's activities.

But, my favorite activity of the week was the raft race. Brighton was an unusual resort in that they decided, over a century ago, to build two large piers out into the sea, with theaters, restaurants and entertainment. About a mile of open water laid between the piers. The raft race started under the Palace Pier and concluded under the West Pier. There were rules about the construction of the rafts to ensure that just about all entrants were guaranteed to have some serious lack in seaworthiness. Each year, around fifty craft were carried to the beach in the mid morning, a smaller number actually floated, a still smaller count made it to the start line. And, yes, about half of the fleet that managed to float made it under the West pier before nightfall. Now that I think about it, I am not at all sure how a raft race made any money towards the

charity fund, but I assume that students were collecting from the crowds of onlookers who came to enjoy the spectacle.

During my first year at college, a group of us lashed together a raft that barely survived the journey from the college to the beach. It was summarily smashed into pieces by a freak six-inch tidal wave that just happened to lap up the beach as we were trying to launch our raft. So we dumped the wreckage in a dumpster and watched the race. I turned to a couple of friends, Alan and Frith, while we dried ourselves, "We should take note of what type of rafts survive best in the waves."

Alan pointed at one raft that floated in calmer waters beyond the waves, "That one is based on four oil drums. It floats well, but it seems to be difficult to paddle and worse to steer."

Frith noticed a raft moving quickly across the open water, "Look at that one. Its two hulls are carved out of solid polystyrene. That one will win without a doubt."

Alan and I agreed. We stood, watching all the craft that had been successfully launched. I was taken aback when I realized that the event was becoming less of a race and more of a battle. "Oh boy, this looks entertaining. Some better prepared crews have loaded stocks of flour bombs on their rafts." Their crews hurled these bombs at other rafts' wet crew members. The flour turned their seawater sodden clothing into a rather sticky mess. Eventually, the supply of flour bombs failed and the serious racing started. It took most rafts that finished between an hour or two to complete the course.

During my second year, another group of us worked on a second raft using the knowledge that we had learned in our first attempt. It was kept afloat using large plastic bags filled with Styrofoam: it was crude but effective. We also decided to find better tools so that we could bolt together the main framework. Despite the sea being rougher than the first year, we managed to launch our raft and safely made it to the start line.

While we sat there waiting and avoiding flour bomb attacks, I noticed this whimsical looking raft being prepared for launching. I pointed towards it, "Take a look at that one. I would say it takes the prize for the most amazing raft."

Alan replied "That one must've been built by art college students. It will be great if it actually works. Can I switch to sign as one of their crew?"

"No. You can't," exclaimed Frith as he leaned over to scoop up a handful of seawater and hurl it at Alan. I wouldn't describe what followed as a re-enactment of Mutiny on the Bounty; it was a watered down version.

The art college students' whimsical raft had two paddle wheels, each based on a very light wooden frame. The paddle wheels stood about six feet high and one foot across. They

were covered and sealed in light clear plastic sheeting. A central axle joined the two paddle wheels into a unit, leaving about four feet between the two wheels. Suspended from the middle of the axle were two trapezes for the two crew members. When sitting, they both would put their feet on pedals that were attached to a drive mechanism for the paddle wheels. The basic engineering that went into the design and construction was amazing. The ingenuity was complemented wonderfully by swathes of light pastel yellow, pink and blue paint that had been randomly splattered across much of the paddle wheels' plastic covering.

The crew and helpers maneuvered their craft to the lapping waves. It did float and was set for a glorious entry into the race. The first member of the crew tried to take their seat, but the framework could not take his weight: the two paddle wheels that had stood vertical, tall and proud began to tilt inward. The tops of the wheel slowly moved toward each other until they touched. Then the whole structure collapsed around the one crew member who had ridden it for probably less than 30 seconds. Other rafts' crews who had watched the launching sighed in unison as it went down. Helping hands grabbed the wreckage from the waves and another valiant effort joined the annals of history.

We paddled for what seemed an eternity and we surprisingly did complete the entire distance. It was a case of who cares who won, we were all victors having just drifted under the West Pier. Our aching muscles felt better after we retired to the pub. That, of course, was for a nice cup of tea. We were poor English college students - if anyone believes that comment about tea, please tell them I have a bridge to sell.