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Netherhall House celebrates its 50th anniversary

Netherhall House, a student residence in London inspired by St. Josemaría Escrivá, reached the half-century mark this past summer. An account of the residence's history and of the commemoration of this year's anniversary follows, along with a video clip of Netherhall highlights.

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Netherhall House has organized various festivities to mark its 50th anniversary this year, as well as social initiatives such as a work camp in Nicaragua for a group of residents.

The commemoration began in June, when Netherhall House's 100 residents were joined for a celebratory weekend by friends, patrons and about 200 alumni from around the globe. Students and ex-residents watched videos of some of the more important moments in Netherhall's history, including the time the Queen Mother came to visit. But more than the historical highlights, the abiding memory from the event was the pleasure for the former residents of coming back to their home in London and exchanging reminiscences. The celebrations included a barbeque on the roof-garden with live music, and

a concert put together by Netherhall residents past and present.

An international residence

Netherhall was acquired as a hall of residence for students of London University and other higher education institutions in 1952. At first it occupied one house and accommodated just 25 students, although it swiftly expanded to include the house next door.

The hall of residence has always been very international. In the academic year 2001-2002 only a quarter of the residents were British, and 30 different countries were represented. Over the entire fifty-year period, of over 3,000 residents known to have lived there for a year or more, half have come from outside Europe.

Netherhall held a special place in the heart of the founder of Opus Dei, St.

Josemaría Escrivá, who visited it during his summer stays in London from 1958 to 1962. The residence has a chapel available to students for prayer or Mass, and has arranged for the prelature of Opus Dei to offer spiritual activities for students who wish to participate. The residence seeks to have an atmosphere of a Christian family. Some years Catholic residents have been in the minority, and they live together with students from other Christian confessions; with students from other religions: Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus; and with some who profess no religion at all.

According to Jim Mirabal, director during the mid-1970s, it is Netherhall's atmosphere that makes it special. "There were a hundred people here, and so well did we get on, it has to be what Saint Josemaría said about there being only one race, the race of the children of God. I

have struggled to find this spirit elsewhere. One appreciates this in later life.”

Kevin Dalton, a student resident during the late 1960s, agrees. In 1968, he says, “Netherhall was free of student rioting – perhaps the only place in London that was. There was too much of a family feel for that.” Important for him were the informal get-togethers in the lounge on Saturday evenings, when people would come in and just talk. Sometimes Bob Farrell (the director at the time) would bring a guitar, and people would join in the singing.

On its fiftieth anniversary Netherhall extends right round one side of the block, with a four-story specially-built residence inaugurated in 1966 by the Queen Mother (who died earlier this year), and a further extension opened in 1995 by the Duchess of Kent.

One of the June weekend visitors was the Bishop of Nottingham, Malcolm McMahon. He celebrated Mass in Netherhall Oratory. In his homily he told a packed congregation the story of how he had come to know the original Netherhall House as a schoolboy in 1965:

“I was introduced to *The Way*, the writings and thoughts of St. Josemaría, when I attended a retreat given here at Netherhall House.... The saying of St. Josemaría that stayed with me – as did my copy of *The Way* stay with me – is the one that goes, 'You have got to be a man of God, a man of interior life, a man of prayer and sacrifice. Your apostolate must be the overflow of your life within.'”

In Netherhall this spirit expresses itself through an atmosphere “conducive both to good study and making friends,” according to Denis

Chang, QC, CBE, former Chairman of the Hong Kong Bar and member of the Hong Kong Government. He tells a story of how in 1968 he used to play chess regularly with a fellow resident who was better than him – and he always lost, until the last game they played before the holidays. “That time I *think* he let me win”, he says, clearly moved.

There was a second fiftieth anniversary celebration on September 7. The response was once again overwhelming. Many past residents came for a second time, their numbers swelled by others who had been unable to make the celebrations in June.

A surprise visitor was the archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor. Together with the rest, he listened to a brilliant recital by the well-known pianist Stephen Hough, one of the patrons of

Netherhall. The cardinal himself is a rather good pianist, though, he joked with the crowd, he has less time to practice now than before.

A trip of solidarity to Nicaragua

Not everyone was able to get to Netherhall the second time round. Sir Bernard Audley, Chairman of the Patrons and for so long a key supporter, with his wife Lady Audley, sent a letter instead: "We both feel that Netherhall has enriched our lives, as it has for so many others." And Augustine J. Chong, a resident in 1960, who became Professor of Physics at the University of Singapore, writes: "I was a foreigner from a small far country, and yet I felt as if I was part of a big family at Netherhall." Buildings come and go, but the spirit remains.

As part of the commemoration, some residents organized a work camp in Nicaragua during the summer. "We

worked in a rather poor rural area, repairing houses and building latrines," said one of the participants, who returned to London impressed by the kindness of the people of the area. "Something that caught our attention powerfully was that the people we met never lost their cheerfulness. They were always happy, content and very supportive. When we were working there they were concerned about how we were doing, whether we were resting enough. They invited us to eat, offered us things that they had and were extremely grateful."
