Tenting: Community and Conformity

“You might want to put your shoes inside; it’s supposed to rain tonight.” Aly Manjee unzips the front door and steps onto a wooden pallet damp from the night before. Aly is a sophomore studying economics, awaiting finance internship offers for 2023. You can usually find him on the squash courts or in his dorm, but this Wednesday night, he is sleeping in tent 114.

Aly is in one of the 130 tents in K-ville. Weeks before the home Duke-UNC basketball game, tents crop up on the lawn of Cameron Indoor Stadium. Normally an open field where students play spike ball or read on a blanket, it has undergone the annual transformation into a village of undergrad fanatics.

Why on earth would *anyone* tent weeks in advance for seats to a college basketball game?

As it turns out, the tenting process is not as simple as showing up, pitching a tent, and camping out. You have to qualify. A record high 174 teams of 12 took the Blue Tenting Test, of which 70 earn the right to set up shop 6 weeks before the game. Questions range from regurgitating box score statistics, to reciting quotations from hour long podcasts, to knowing which UNC players bled during a Duke-UNC game.

For the unlucky majority who did not qualify, there is one last hope: the scavenger hunt. After exploring the nooks and crannies of Duke in preparation, teams spread strategically across campus as night falls. At 10 p.m. sharp, five clues hinting at five specific locations on campus are released. Students dart around in a panic, hurdling bushes and leaping down stairs to get to the check-ins as fast as possible. The 60 tents with the lowest average check-in score qualify to tent for two weeks before the game. “People don’t get from the outside what it takes to get into a Duke-UNC game,” says Aly.

Now really, with all the work and stress that goes into merely *qualifying*, why would anyone - not only willingly, but enthusiastically - decide to tent?

“Some people are just basketball fanatics,” says Aly, gazing up at the strand of dim fairy lights taped to the top of the tent. “I’m a basketball fan, but I’m not a diehard basketball fan - I’ll watch the games sometimes.”

Aly was an avid NBA (and more specifically LeBron) fan before coming to Duke. He never followed college basketball closely - except for the Duke-UNC game. He remembers his older brother telling tales about Duke-UNC, and watching the rivalry game in high school together with his friends.

“My brother went to Duke, now I go to Duke…” says Aly, “It would almost be a waste, if after following it for so long and being one degree away from it… I’m finally here.”

This year is a special year in Duke’s tenting history: it’s Coach K’s last.

“With Coach K’s last year there’s a certain… if you’re a duke student you *should* be going to this game. From the outside it’s like: ‘Why would you not go to this game?’” says Aly.

“Coach K and Duke are one-in-the-same,” says Aly. “Say 20 years from now, will you still be from your hometown? If you spent more time in New York than in Florida, where will you be from? New York, right? Something that you’ll still talk about, though, is where you went to college. I feel that that stays a part of your identity.”

A siren blares in the distance, dying and cutting in and out.

“Tent check,” says Aly.

Slowly, dreary eyed students rise out of their stupor and emerge under tent flaps. Trudging towards the white study tent, navigating between lawn chairs and empty beer cans, queuing up single-file in their designated line next to the basketball hoop, they flash a Duke ID and say a tent number. Now, back to the tent.

A few flattened tents can be seen on the way back: disconnected poles and crumpled tarps strewn across the ground. They must’ve missed two checks.

But in the final week of tenting, there is hope in the air.

“It’s so warm tonight.”

“This is my last night in the tent!”

“Who else out here be sleeping in a tent 6 to 8 weeks bro? What other student body is doing this? We’re just crazy for doing this,” says Aly.

The next day, I caught Sarah Gaither, two tote bags in tow, leaving her office to make her lecture across campus. She is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke, researching the intersection of social identity and behavior.

“From a social psychology perspective, it’s conformity. [Some] students will try it once just to say that they’ve done it. It’s part of this aspect of what it means to be a Dukie,” says Gaither. “You want to belong to the Duke culture. “

“For you to be able to say that you spent a month of your life, while you’re paying for a perfectly good dorm on campus which is thousands of dollars, for you to sleep outside in a tent in the snow… it’s a pretty unique story for you to be able to tell your hypothetical grandkids.”

When asked what she thought of tenting from a faculty perspective, she said, “I would tent! If they had tenting for faculty, I would 100% go tenting for Duke-UNC.”

“Sarah, I’ll tent with you!” Said Tamar Kushnir, a Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, and Gaither’s office neighbor.

“I would tent for Duke-UNC tickets because they are $10,000 and I don’t get paid enough for that,” says Gaither.

“But it would be for the same reasons - to say that I’ve done it, to say that I’ve tried it, and because it’s a part of this unique Duke history that you just want to say you’re a part of.”