

TIMOTHY
M^C SWEENEY'S

OVERNIGHT BAG CALLS A LOT INTO
QUESTION.



DISPATCHES FROM THE
CAPITAL

Washington, D.C., is home to a new president in an era of high hopes and challenging conditions. It's also home to many more with their own hopes and challenges. Some believe change, like Obama, has arrived and is making their lives better. Others are just trying to make a living. These dispatches take a further look at the city first examined in "Dispatches From the Anacostia," and will follow those living and working around our nation's capital during this era of change.

DISPATCH 6: WHAT'S FIGHT CLUB WITHOUT THE FIGHTING?

BY HOLLY JONES

People often complain that DC falls short as far as big cities go. And they're right. We've got bars, but almost no food available after midnight. We've got the long hours of "work hard, play hard," but someone forgot the "play hard" half of the equation. We've even got our very own Fight Club—but no one fights.

The first rule of *Fight Club*: You do not talk about Fight Club.

Except when the organizers love art and need money to pay the electricity bill. Some Saturdays, Fight Club hosts art shows and the line stretches into the alley, past a string of renovated buildings along 9th Street NW. Where crack addicts used to pee against the wall, you can now buy salads and sandwiches. The building next door used to host swingers and bondage clubs but, as the 'hood went more upscale, word spread amongst the new residents that debauchery was going on in their midst and the clubs went under. Now folks go there for jazz, not swinging. It's just not the same.

I wonder what the neighbors think when they peek outside and see Fight Club partygoers lined up, iPhones and Blackberries in hand. I tell the guy at the

door I heard about the party on Facebook, pay my five dollars and step inside.

The second rule of *Fight Club*: You DO NOT talk about Fight Club.

Or maybe you just don't talk to your mom about it. Even after she's driven you from your posh Chevy Chase home, and waits, dutifully, for you to take your turn in the bowl. Because here's what goes on at DC's Fight Club: skateboarding.

Before the 9th Street Fight Club was, well, a fight club, it was an abandoned office/light manufacturing space with apartments upstairs and an endless stream of crack addicts, dealers and cops. Then Dan Zeman, an archivist with a purple goatee and more commitment to "Home Rule" than a dozen DC prep schools' PTAs, got tired of this scene. He chased out whoever was there, secured the doors and windows and, with Anthony Smallwood and Ben Ashworth, built a bowl and a half-pipe on the ground floor. They invited friends. Someone said its ceiling-less rooms and busted lights reminded them of the house in the movie, *Fight Club*. The name stuck.

On Saturdays, the bowl's open to anyone and, this Saturday, Fight Club's also hosting an art show. Worlds could collide, but don't. The boarders don't care about the patrons. The patrons peer into the bowl, but don't try to talk with them. And the parents who've driven

their skateboarding young are sent wherever they're least likely to be identified as parents.

One mom asks her daughter if she needs a sweater. Bad move.

"Stop talking to me, Mom!"

The girl storms off. The mom folds the sweater and takes another sip of Miller Lite. A Spanish artist nearby sniffs and says, to no one in particular, that he's seen this scene in New York for years. This "Fight Club" is nothing special. Maybe. Maybe not.

The third rule of *Fight Club*: If someone says stop, you must stop fighting.

Unless it's invitation-only Wednesday night when most skaters forego helmets and pads. The other reason people call this a fight club: skaters can come out as banged up as if they've been in a fight.

When I return on a Wednesday, seven are perched on the bowl rim, and one woman is riding it. She lives at Fight Club and rarely wipes out. Anthony, my Fight Club guide and one very fascinating photographer-surfer-skater-art aficionado, points toward the ceiling beams.

"She's dropped through there a few times. It's a six, maybe seven foot vertical drop to the ramp, and she cleared it."

He's describing a drop from the beams between two poles. When Anthony, Dan and Ben first walked through, there was no ceiling grid through which to drop. They added that, the insulation and some panels here and there. The result is a patchwork of holes, finished ceiling and folds of insulation with nowhere to go. It's almost homey.

The speakers blast a bass backbeat with a female vocalist moaning. The woman rides up the ramp, her head vanishes for an instant through the ceiling grid and she drops back down.

She crests the bowl again, heading for the platform and the next skater's in before she's fully out. His ride isn't quite as smooth, but his attitude is pure *Fight Club* skater. Even when he falls.

A thumping sound—his body hitting and rolling along the concrete floor—eclipses the orgasmic wailing overhead. A few people clap. The skater springs up. He rides his board halfway up the ramp and then runs the rest of the way. If not for the brief touch of his wrist, no one would know the fall stung. But no one's looking. The next skater's already dropping into the bowl.

The fourth rule of *Fight Club*: Only two guys to a fight.

But as many on the platform as possible. The skaters don't mix with the paying guests. They prefer staying above the crowd, watching each other ride.

I stand at the base of a metal ladder leading up to the platform. The ramp groans as the boards roll over soft patches. The rhythm of wheels is punctuated by a scuffling when skaters stumble. I can see the skaters through the ladder rungs.

“It’s like being at the zoo, yeah?” someone asks.

I turn. A guy with a camera and a face-splitting smile is shaking his head at the skaters. I shrug and tell him, “DC’s more of a circus than a zoo.”

“But we don’t know who’s the visitor and who’s the animal,” he points out.

“You want to come up?” a voice calls down. Next comes a hand, to help me up.

I’m wearing a miniskirt and knee-high boots. I am not there to skate. But the platform crowded with guys focused on skating seems the sanest spot in the house.

From eight feet above, I watch the paying guests fidget. Their hands flutter as they talk about art they don’t focus on because they’re watching everyone walking by. For them, it’s a Saturday night mating dance and art scene rolled into one. The skaters study the boards in motion and ready themselves to dip into the bowl. They have more focus and energy than everyone below. I don’t know how to skate, and wouldn’t roll as smoothly if I fell. But, if these are the zoo animals, I want to be one.

The seventh rule of *Fight Club*: Fights go on as long as they have to.

Except if you live there and have work the next morning.

Nights can go late at the 9th Street Fight Club. Skaters ride the bowl, talk around the fire and drink or smoke until they can't stay awake any longer. Sometimes. The ones living upstairs pay rent and hold jobs. They don't always stay up that late.

When I come back on a weeknight, I see dishes, food and a pair of running shoes near the back door. Skaters eye me in a way they wouldn't during a fundraising art show. Fight Club throws a good party and they clean up well for it. But, like every host, they like having their home back when the party's over.

The first rule of DC's Fight Club (according to Anthony): "Everyone has to skate in the bowl at least once, even if they bust their ass. Take some risk and challenge yourself!"

Anthony emails this after my second visit. I've asked him for the first rule of DC's fight club, but I didn't expect a call to arms. A carpe diem message. A ray of light in the midst of DC's rainy December. Yes, I think, remembering how great it felt standing on the platform beside the skaters. I'll do just that.

The eighth rule of *Fight Club*: If this is your first night at Fight Club, you have to fight.

If invited. Or it's Saturday.

But it's my third visit and it's Wednesday. Still, I want a turn in the bowl.

The temperature's below freezing. People sit around the fire and skaters blow on hands to stay warm. I've brought my friend, Sandra. We're wishing we'd brought a flask.

I approach the bowl. I don't even want to reach the rim. If I make it five feet up the side without breaking a bone, I'll be happy.

"Hey." One skater grins as he walks past.

I turn, decide he's a suitable skateboarding coach, and prepare to beg. "Anyone ever tell you you look like Michelle Pfeiffer?" he asks before I can speak.

I don't. And I definitely don't while sporting a winter hat straight out of *Fargo*.

I turn to Sandra.

She shakes her head.

I could run after the skater, but the shoes I thought would be okay for skating now feel like popsicles on my feet, and I can't imagine riding a board in them. While I'm still weighing *carpe diem* living against certain bodily injury, the skater drops his board into the bowl. It's too late. You just don't interrupt a skater to ask for a lesson.

It's not that the Fight Club gang doesn't welcome new people. The girl at the front door offered homemade chocolate chip cookies as she greeted us. Upstairs, red-ribboned decorations hang on bedroom doors, hearkening the holiday spirit. But skateboarding is a world apart from cookies and ho-ho-ho greetings.

Sure, people can slam into the ceiling grid and concrete block walls, but only if they're *in* the scene. Otherwise, they skate on Saturdays alongside the teenagers driven in from the 'burbs by their parents.

Anthony's first rule of Fight Club sounds in my head again. I remember the young skater who snapped at her mom. There may not be room enough on the platform for her, me and the flask I'm bringing next time, but Fight Club's a friendly place. I'm willing to give it a try.