Life in a Fishbowl

Submitted by: Matthew Putnam, Former RD at Texas Tech
Courtesy of www.reslife.net

Don’t be alarmed, but I think they’re watching you. Not just when you’re walking your rounds; not just when you’re in the building; and not just when you’re confronting a situation. They are watching you everywhere you go.

And “they” are not only your residents, but most likely every student on campus.

It doesn’t seem very likely, does it? But the truth of the matter is that when you accepted your position you entered into The Fishbowl. And whether you’re an RA or the President of the United States, once you enter The Fishbowl everyone thinks everything you do is his or her business. (If you don’t believe me, take a moment and remember the color of Monica Lewinsky’s dress as well as which clothing chain it came from.)

The worst part of The Fishbowl is that you can’t escape it. Whether you’re in class, spending time with your friends around campus, at the movies, or running errands around town (especially if your university is in a smaller city) somebody is going to see you as John or Jane Doe, RA.

The downside is that you never know when someone is going to see you do something that will damage your credibility as a Resident Assistant. Well, perhaps you know if you do something as egregious as get roaring drunk at a friend’s party and dance on the coffee table wearing your panties on your head. But it could also be as simple as inadvertently dropping a piece of trash on the ground or being overheard saying something that, taken out of context or not, is construed as offensive.

Now that you are beginning to see watchers around every corner, how do you survive The Fishbowl? I always remember something my mom told me when I was growing up. “Matthew,” she said, “this is a small town. Your great-grandparents and your grandparents have lived here for years. Your dad and I grew up here and graduated from high school here. So think about what you’re doing. And don’t be surprised if we find out you’ve caused some kind of trouble, because you’re bound to be recognized by someone we know.”

Needless to say I was on my best behavior all during high school. At least in public. But as extreme as that example may be, the key to success in The Fishbowl is to think about what you’re doing. No one expects you to be a saint, but you’ll avoid a great deal of trouble if you stay aware of how your actions might be interpreted. You won’t always know if someone with a campus connection is observing you, but if you ask yourself “How would I feel if my residents/supervisor saw me do this?” you’ll have a good gauge of what might cause you trouble down the road.

You also need to take care of yourself. You’re going to be in The Fishbowl 24/7 so it’s going to be important to monitor your stress level. Do some of your homework in the library or another favorite quiet spot on campus. Maintain your support network, and spend time with people who know you as an individual and not as an RA.

But before you start considering other jobs on campus, there’s also an upside to The Fishbowl. Your position gives you a tremendous opportunity to be both a role model and
advocate on your campus. Other students will see your involvement on campus as behavior worth emulating, especially if you seem to be enjoying your college experience.

Not only that, but everything you say from within The Fishbowl takes on greater significance. (Which is why causes with celebrity spokespeople get more, and usually better, press.) If there is a pressing issue on your campus, or if you’re speaking out against bigotry or discrimination, your voice will carry more weight with your fellow students because of your position.

The Fishbowl is a tremendous responsibility but it can also be one of the most rewarding experiences of your college career. How you choose to view and utilize your increased visibility on campus will be one of the most important decisions you will make as a Resident Assistant.

About the Author

Matthew Putnam spent four years working in Residence Life at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as an undergraduate, and eighteen months as a Residence Hall Director at Texas Tech University. He now lives in Seattle and manages volunteers for an AIDS service organization.