

Coming up Lavender: Year One at Lavender Lane

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On the third floor of Lavender Lane is a single bedroom. Blue rug. Blue sheets. Blue pillowcases. Blue accent furniture. On the desk, there's a candle that reads: "When This Candle Is Lit, Give Me That Dick" next to a plaque reading "Through God All Things Are Possible." This is the bedroom of Image Patterson '25, current resident of Lavender Lane, and one of its next vice presidents.

"It's my personal mission as an executive member of the Lavender Lane house to make it BIPOC friendly and make sure we are an open community for all people," Patterson said. "I value the safety of the residents but also making sure all queer people have a safe space and an educational space."

Located at 2 West Campus Lane, Lavender Lane is a gender-inclusive housing option for 25 LGBTQIA+ students and allies. In the fall 2022 semester, the former Tri Delta sorority house at Lafayette College was rebranded as Lavender Lane, which the Lafayette website describes as a place "dedicated to creating an inclusive and queer affirming living space on-campus."

In the past year, Lavender Lane has established itself as a presence on campus, hosting myriad social and educational events for students across gender and sexuality identities. But like many new campus organizations, Lavender Lane also experienced growing pains in its first year. However, residents of Lavender Lane are hopeful about the house's growing role on campus.

Background

The idea for Lavender Lane was spearheaded by two founding members of OUT Lafayette, a student-led LGBTQIA+ pride organization, Meredith McGee '23 and K Massi '23. McGee is the president of the Lavender Lane house and vice president of OUT, and Massi is the president of OUT.

When Tri Delta’s Lafayette chapter was disbanded in spring 2020 following controversy around sexual assault in fraternities, its former house served as a regular dormitory for one year, until the college announced an open call for student groups to apply to turn it into special interest housing. McGee and Massi applied for the house on behalf of OUT, although students are not required to be members of OUT to live in Lavender Lane.

In their [application](#) for the house, McGee and Massi state, “The main goal of our house will be to provide a safe, welcoming environment to members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and provide a second, gender-inclusive floor, outside of the Conway House that is provided to incoming freshmen. We want to establish a community among Queer students on campus while also promoting the safety of living among fellow queer peers.”

They also discuss the potential benefits to the mental wellbeing of queer students, writing, “In addition, Queer issues and queer day-to-day life is often draining, and having a dedicated space to feel safe, take away some of that burden on the students, and can improve overall mental health.”

The house was approved in December 2021, and OUT immediately began to advertise it on social media. Following mandatory information sessions for all interested students, McGee and Massi reviewed applications and selected the 25 students who would move into Lavender Lane later that summer.

McGee and Massi worked closely with Tommy Lee, the Assistant Director for the Gender & Sexuality programs at Lafayette, in applying for the house. Lee also agreed to be the faculty advisor for the house.

Emphasizing the difference between gender-neutral and gender-inclusive housing, Lee cited a need for gender-inclusive housing on Lafayette’s campus for students, noting that these spaces exist for students at Lafayette’s peer institutions, including Grinnell College, Haverford College and Hamilton College. In our list of 20 peer/aspirational institutions, Lafayette is one of the few that does not offer expansive gender-inclusive housing options for all students.



Joint Instagram post from OUT (@out_laf) and the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center (@lafayette_gsrc) celebrating move-in day on August 27, 2022.

“The college [was] doing a reassessment of our campus pride index score,” Lee said. “And one of the measures is do you have gender inclusive housing for all years of your college experience, and as of summer [2021], the answer was yes, for freshmen.”

The college historically has had gender-inclusive housing options for first-year students, but not for upperclassmen students. Lee said that while upperclassmen can create a gender-neutral housing “pod,” it was not a housing option “intentionally designed to be mindful and inclusive of people’s gender identity.” This is because pod housing at Lafayette is very limited, as very few dorm buildings have gender-neutral bathrooms, and pod housing is gender-segregated by room, regardless of building. Availability also depends on the number the pod gets in the housing lottery, so there is a chance that they would have to separate and find new housing accommodations. Lafayette does not guarantee housing unless a student has medical accommodations.

According to [the article](#) “Former sorority house to become gender-inclusive student housing” published in *The Hill* in February 2022, the house’s name is “a reference to the ‘lavender scare’ of the 1950s and 1960s, when thousands of LGBTQ+ federal workers were fired and accused of being communist sympathizers.”

Life in the House

Sammie Peabody ‘25 said that since she has moved into the house, she has made close connections with her housemates. When she wakes up, she washes her face and brushes her teeth in one of the house’s four shared bathrooms. She often cooks in the house’s two kitchens, and her housemates are always eager to find out what she is cooking—and potentially eat with her. When she returns home from classes, her housemates greet her in the living room and she does homework with them.



Sammie Peabody ‘25
Photo credit: Sammie Peabody

“One thing that is constant is that my housemates and I always greet each other when we see each other inside and outside the house,” Peabody said. “There have been numerous instances where I’ve spent so much time talking with [them] around the house, which is always enjoyable.”

To live in Lavender Lane, students of any class year can fill out the interest [form](#) located on Lafayette’s website, which includes questions about preferences to live

in a single or double bedroom. The house is made up of mostly single bedrooms, with four double bedrooms, as well as kitchens on two floors, gender-neutral restrooms, and study spaces.

Every resident of Lavender Lane is required to sign a pledge affirming their commitment to creating a friendly and safe living space for queer people. During the Fall 2022 semester, the residents also drafted a more specific code of conduct that outlines general guidelines and stipulations for harmonious and respectful living. The code also includes guidelines for contributing to the living and learning element of the house. House leadership plans to enshrine this code of conduct into the house constitution, which should be in place by the start of the '23-'24 school year. The constitution will serve as a more comprehensive document encompassing the values the house aims to uphold.



One of the shared common spaces on the first floor of the house.
Photo credit: Charlotte Marshall

Since Lavender Lane is a form of special interest housing, its residents are also expected to attend social programs each month that promote inclusivity, allyship, conflict-resolution strategies and sex education and positivity. According to the College's [policy](#), all special-interest houses are also required to "sponsor at least one event per month in support of [the] group's theme or mission." Lee said that Lavender Lane's resident population plays a large part in organizing and implementing the programs, while he assists with planning and outreach.

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An example of a social program organized by Lavender Lane was an information session in late February with Dr. Jeffrey Goldstein, the on-campus physician and Director of Health Services at Bailey Health Center. In the open Q&A session, Goldstein received feedback from attendees of the talk on how to make Bailey Health Center more inclusive and informed about queer-specific issues. The house also hosts more informal social events, such as game nights and an open house/alumni mixer for the weekend of the Lafayette-Lehigh rivalry game.

Some current residents of Lavender Lane have said there is a positive atmosphere in the house. "There's never been a time where I was in Lavender Lane and I felt uncomfortable or unsafe," Cheng said, "And I can't say that for the rest of campus. Both being an Asian American and being a very obvious lesbian, [being here within] these walls, I'm safe. I've never felt like

anything was going to happen to me here, whereas I'll be walking out of Farinon at night and I have to be on guard."

Patterson highlighted the support system created in the house—including residents caring for one another through sickness—which stems from a place of love: "I think any community ebbs and flows because that's what happens. But one thing that has always remained constant is, to be quite honest, there are people in this house who just exude love. I know that like if I come downstairs, there's going to be someone at that table that I can sit with in just perfect silence or engage in conversation with. It's like no matter what ups and downs [we've had], community has stayed."

They also expressed finding comfort in the house's open-minded stance on queerness. "Queerness is fluid. You can't put anything in a box and I feel like this space pleasantly surprised me because it is a fluid space. People came and felt safe and had fun."

When asked about their housing plans for next year, Patterson said, "For me, [Lavender Lane] is actually the first safe space I found on campus... I don't want to leave. This is my home."

Growing Pains

While the first year of Lavender Lane was mostly focused on community building and attempts to create a more inclusive campus culture, residents have cited conflicts within the house, which seem to reflect issues and tensions present within the campus at large.

The Lavender Lane housing application says "we plan...to make the community as inclusive as possible," a goal reinforced by the code of conduct that was designed in part to mitigate inter-house conflict. But Lee, who has a background in conflict-resolution training, said he thinks the code of conduct "needs to be more clearly intentioned around [addressing] conflict." Since the code of conduct is primarily concerned with "respecting communal space," it "lacks [a clause about] what happens when you don't uphold the code of conduct," Lee said.



Image Patterson '25, incoming Vice President (External) of Lavender Lane.
Photo Credit: Image Patterson

Residents have also cited concerns that the administration and residence life do not take their concerns about the house's structural problems seriously, or only engage with the house's problem on a superficial level.

In October of 2022, Lavender Lane saw a lavender literalization: residents returned to the house after fall break and were surprised to find that the president of Lafayette, Nicole Hurd, had the walls painted a bright lavender color.



Photos of some of the damage caused by the plumbing issues over winter break.
Photo credit: Cate Cheng

Patterson appreciated the paint job, saying that the house was “very dingy” before it, but also spoke to the performative nature of the gesture. “The [administration] thought they were doing something by painting it,” Patterson said. “I’m happy that it’s purple. But at the same time, no one should have to argue with you to get maintenance done.”

Cate Cheng '25, resident of Lavender Lane and incoming president of OUT Lafayette, said, “The school doesn’t really take the problems in the house all that seriously, and while a fresh coat of paint is nice, it’s quite

literally just trying to paint over the problems instead of finding actual solutions to things.”

But some problems in the house cannot be painted over. During the Winter Break of 2022, a pipe burst in the house and the ceiling collapsed in one of the common spaces on the first floor. Only Patterson and one other resident were notified, as they were supposed to live in Lavender Lane over the break. When the residents returned and tried to shower, cook and fill their Britas, they found that the water was running brown.

After numerous calls and emails to the Office of Residence Life, they were told to “leave the water running for a little bit and it should go away,” according to Cheng. Throughout the next day the water was still running brown. “It actually took a number of us calling our parents and our parents calling the school, and the second the parents called the school, they had bottled water delivered to us and people going in and out,” Cheng said.

“I think Lavender Lane does a sufficient enough job being a living space. However, there's been numerous issues with the building,” Peabody said. “A ceiling tile almost fell on my head, we've had endless plumbing issues from bathrooms to washing machines, and we even went through a time where we didn't have electricity for four days.”

Residents had mixed reactions to an [article](#) published in *The Lafayette* in March 2023 titled “Queer people of color speak on Lavender Lane inclusivity issues.” The article claimed that some queer of color Lavender Lane residents have experienced racialized microaggressions in the house.

As explored in the article, one instance of racial discrimination occurred after certain residents took issue with Patterson washing their hair in the sink of the upstairs bathroom, as they are not able to wash their hair in the shower. The conflict was handled cordially within the house until the Lafayette Office of Residence Life got involved. When Patterson reached out to Residence Life about the matter, the response they received was, according to Patterson, dismissive and racist. As a solution, the administration gave Patterson a 12” by 6” plastic bucket to wash their hair, which would require them kneeling on the bathroom floor to use.

“It was the most [demeaning] thing,” Patterson said. “They gave me a bucket and I had to get on my knees and put my head in the bucket to wash my hair. To be honest, I was bawling my eyes out. It just goes to show what institutionalized racism is. The person who bought [the bucket] thought they were being a savior.... I felt like a woman—a Black woman—in that moment; I felt reduced.”

Lavender Lane residents have cited this as an example of the administration's inability to properly support all of the house's inhabitants. But queer students of color living in the house, as well as McGee and Massi, took issue with *The Lafayette* newspaper article because they believed their words were taken out of context, with the article shifting the focus from a lack of administrative support to solely discuss interpersonal problems amongst residents.

“What really disappointed me [about the article] is the lack of positive things that I said about the house [being included],” Peabody said. In the article, Peabody is quoted expressing



The bucket Residence Life gave Image.
Photo credit: Alex Thurtle

frustration with the “ridiculous” microaggressions that occurred in the house, as well as her concerns about the house not being a “safe space” for queer people of color.

“I feel supported enough to not feel like a complete alien [in the house],” Peabody said. “[But] I feel like it would help out a lot for all people of color in the house for there to be programs educating the residents about POC struggles, experiences and cultures.”

In response to the article, house resident Miles Asher Dorai-Raj submitted a [Letter to the Editor](#), which was published on the *Lafayette* website in late March. In it, Dorai-Raj writes, “The people who live here are vetted for their ability to treat other people with respect. While that has not been consistent throughout the year, and there have been issues of very obvious racial bias, this is not due to any one person being a racist. It has to do with a lack of consideration for the perspectives and experiences of others. Most of the issues within the house have been due to the way the college is structured, prioritizing white, cishet males over every other person, and that

is something that needs to be changed. That being said, though, Meredith has worked very hard to get this house for us, and is working very hard to make it a home for all Queer people, regardless of skin color.”



Cate Cheng '25
Photo Credit: Cate Cheng

Cheng also penned a [Letter to the Editor](#), published on April 7, 2023. The letter outlines a house meeting in which residents discussed the original article; discussing the outcome of the meeting, Cheng writes, “it became clear that while there are undoubtedly issues as there are in all living situations, the resounding opinion of queer POC residents is that the house is a positive community and safe space on the campus, to which I wholeheartedly agree.”

Lavender Lane has been criticized on the social media platform YikYak, where anonymous users have argued that the space is not welcoming for *all* queer students, only those in certain subgroups. These critiques came on the back of a misunderstanding—in April, a gay party hosted by a Lafayette student who does not live in Lavender Lane was attributed to the house—but speak to real concerns some queer students have about the house fostering an environment of exclusivity.

“It was really disheartening,” Cheng said, referencing other queer students speaking out against Lavender Lane. “We really try to make this a safe space for everyone.”

In addition, the Yaks grouped together OUT and Lavender Lane—due to the overlap in leadership and membership—instead of acknowledging them as separate entities. This has been a pervasive problem for the house all year, wherein all queer activities and students are linked to Lavender Lane, regardless of their involvement in the house. Patterson plans to address this issue next year, in part by creating separate social media accounts for Lavender Lane, such as a new [Instagram page](#) that launched in May 2023.

“Many people on YikYak said [that] Lavender Lane failed, but I hope with my [new executive board] position to help make Lavender Lane great,” Patterson said.

The Future of Lavender Lane

As special interest housing, residents of Lavender Lane are required to reapply for the house each year, a requirement Lee hopes to eliminate someday. For the 2023–2024 academic year, the number of applicants decreased from 35 to 25. Lee expressed uncertainty about the reason behind this decrease, but said that feelings of exclusivity are “probably part of it.”



The exterior of Lavender Lane.
Photo credit: Emma Sylvester

Peabody believes Lavender Lane needs to learn from the ups and downs of their first year and use them as a reference point to further establish the definition of a “safe space” within the house.

“Lavender Lane is definitely all of what I expected, the good and the bad...from the conflict, and the reconnection to the strengthening of the community,” Peabody said. “I feel like more POC representation in this house can help the house and community as a whole better understand the issues behind race and the racial inequalities and struggles that we go through.”

One of Patterson’s goals is to continue expanding the educational programs, specifically including ones that would help the residents

understand each other's identities and perspectives. It's a task they will take on next year as the Vice President External, a position designed to work on collaborative projects with outside organizations.

"One of the programs I want to do is cultural tolerance, [because] right now we live in a house with people of many different backgrounds." Referring to the hair-washing incident, they said, "There was a little situation in the house, but it was resolved because I talked about it. That's what being in a living learning environment is."

Cheng believes Lavender Lane has made progress in its overall goal of being a safe-space on campus in its first year.

"I think the goal of Lavender Lane is to foster a place of safety and [comfort]," Cheng said. "But I really think that we want to be able to make a household of queer joy, besides just the baseline of 'I want a space that I can be in where I know I'm not going to be dead-named and hate-crimed.' That should be a basic fundamental right, but I know, at least for me, I really want that familial, happy atmosphere [in the house]. And I think that we've done a pretty good job already having that."

Cheng said that the house has been an incredibly safe space for her and hopes that it also felt that way to the other students living in, and visiting, Lavender Lane.

"What I really want to see continue is making queer students on campus happy and safe," Cheng said.