International Relations
By Michelle Ling

It's a favorite story around the International House, one that Director Joe Lurie loves to tell: “When I-House first opened in 1930, it was the first international, multiracial, co-ed living community west of New York, and there was quite an uproar in the community. People were afraid of the sexes and races would—and here Lurie’s eyes get wide—‘mingle.’

“And you know what?” he continues, a sparkling grin breaking out from behind his dark beard. “They were right!”

So right, in fact, that I-House has become well known for its matchmaking power for thousands of couples throughout the years. On the eve of Valentine’s Day 1999, some 30 couples and other I-House friends returned to the historic residence hall to celebrate the time and place that brought them together.

During cocktails and dinner in the auditorium, I-House alums from the ’40s to the ’90s shared their tales of first meetings and courtships—some rocky, some silly, some elaborately schemed.

“When I first saw her in the dining hall,” Eugene Pekary, Ph.D. ’70, said of his wife Jean ’67, “I almost dropped my tray! But she was in a group of Filipino students, and I knew very well that you didn’t talk to an Oriental lady without having a mutual acquaintance to introduce you, so I had to bide my time.”

When that time came, Pekary said, he was in the dining hall on Asian theme night. “I wanted to see where she sat, but I had already gone through the cafeteria line. So I threw away my plate and got back in line!”

“Bill was the coordinator of activity groups in the house,” explained Karen Podolsky, M.A. ’66. “It was fun stuff—pumpkin carvings, theme parties, picnics,” chimed in Bill Podolsky, M.A. ’66, Ph.D. ’71. “I thought it was ridiculous. I never got involved with those things,” Mrs. Podolsky interrupted him. “But he helped me with my homework, and then one winter we went up to Cal Lodge with a group of friends, and...” she says smiling at him, “it grew from there.”

Those without a winter retreat had to improvise in order to meet each other. “In the Sixties, the boys’ and girls’ dorms were separated,” said Karen Podolsky. “After visiting hours were over, people would sneak through the library, which is in between them, from one side to the other. I remember being in there late at night, and there was a lot of traffic through the stacks.”

“I told everyone I knew, ‘When Tatia comes by, let me know so I can come out of my room,’” said Francisco Lira ’92. “I was very active and I knew everyone in the house. So, sometimes at 3 in the morning, my phone would ring, and someone would say, ‘She’s in the Great Hall!’ It got so bad that sometimes people would call and say, ‘You know, she’s in
the dining room,' and I'd say, 'Yeah, I know. Two people already called!'

"I didn't have any idea," Lira's wife Tatia Jordan '91 said, laughing. "I just thought people didn't like me—because people would get up and leave every time I came into a room!"

THE RESIDENCE HALL'S MATCHMAKING potential, particularly interracial matchmaking potential, has been a fundamental part of I-House history since its inception. The late Allen Blaisdell, Ph.D. '39, the house's first director, recalled in an interview for the Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Project that it was hardly a joking matter in the early days.

"This question regarding International House was always raised," he said. "Never once in those early days in the question period after a speech did it fail that I had to answer the question of intermarriage."

The house's official independence from the University helped give Blaisdell the freedom to "set the pattern" for interracial housing in the West. Still, he remembered, pre-WWII isolationist sentiments were strong, and there was quite a bit of controversy when the house opened in 1930.

It also was one of the first co-ed dorms in the nation, an idea that Cal's dean of women opposed. Blaisdell said she refused to put the house on the University's approved housing list, would not allow any notices advertising it in the housing office, and required all women to have written permission from their parents in order to live there.

Throughout his life, Blaisdell championed the I-House principles of international understanding and tolerance, and defended interracial couples, even at the risk of his own safety. The first interracial marriage spawned from I-House, he recalled, involved a Japanese woman who was sent to Cal for an education by a Japanese man who had bought her to be his future wife. While at I-House, she fell in love with another resident, the white son of a Baptist minister from Oregon.

But on a trip to California, the Japanese would-be groom discovered the couple, and came after them with a gun. So Blaisdell smuggled the woman to San Francisco and hid her in a Chinese housing unit. "As I drove onto the ferry," Blaisdell said, "the Japanese man drove up right next to me! I pushed her down in the back seat and covered her with a blanket, and he did not catch on." Blaisdell arranged for the woman to flee to Paris later, where she and her lover were married.

For some time afterwards, Blaisdell said, "I had to go in the back door of International House because [the jilted Japanese man] was gunning for us!"

I-House nuptials are not typically born of such dramatic circumstances, and multitudes of happy I-House couples speak warmly of a special connection to the place; many alums return to have their wedding ceremonies and receptions there.

Cliff Ho, M.S. '90, Ph.D. '93 and Sylvia Saltzstein, MPH '93 met in the I-House Café while they were residents; when they decided to marry in October 1994, at the Faculty Glade, they asked I-House director Joe Lurie to officiate. Lurie was delighted to obtain a one-day justice of the peace license and oblige.

At the Valentine's Day dinner/dance, Lurie proudly showed a portion of the Ho and Saltzstein wedding video. "My time at I-House were four of the best years of my life," Ho said. "We asked Joe to officiate the ceremony—" "—since I-House brought us together," Saltzstein said, finishing her husband's thought.

Francisco and Tatia Jordan Lira

Cliff Ho and Sylvia Saltzstein, at the I-House Café on October 30, 1991—the night they met (above right)—and, four years later on their wedding day in Faculty Glade.

Jeanne Hoffman Griffith, M.A. '54 and Ladd Griffith, Ph.D. '57 share a dance after dinner.