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WKU's Garrett Conference Center comes down his summer

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Lisa Jessie roomed in Bemis Lawrence Hall, then Minton, but when she attended Western Kentucky University in the 1980s – a good chunk of which she spent on the production staff of the College Heights Herald – Garrett Conference Center felt most like home.

Jessie, now with a Louisville communications firm after a career of editing some of the region’s flagship newspapers and finance, remembers much about Garrett, a building that now languishes atop WKU’s hill with old bones that date to 1951.



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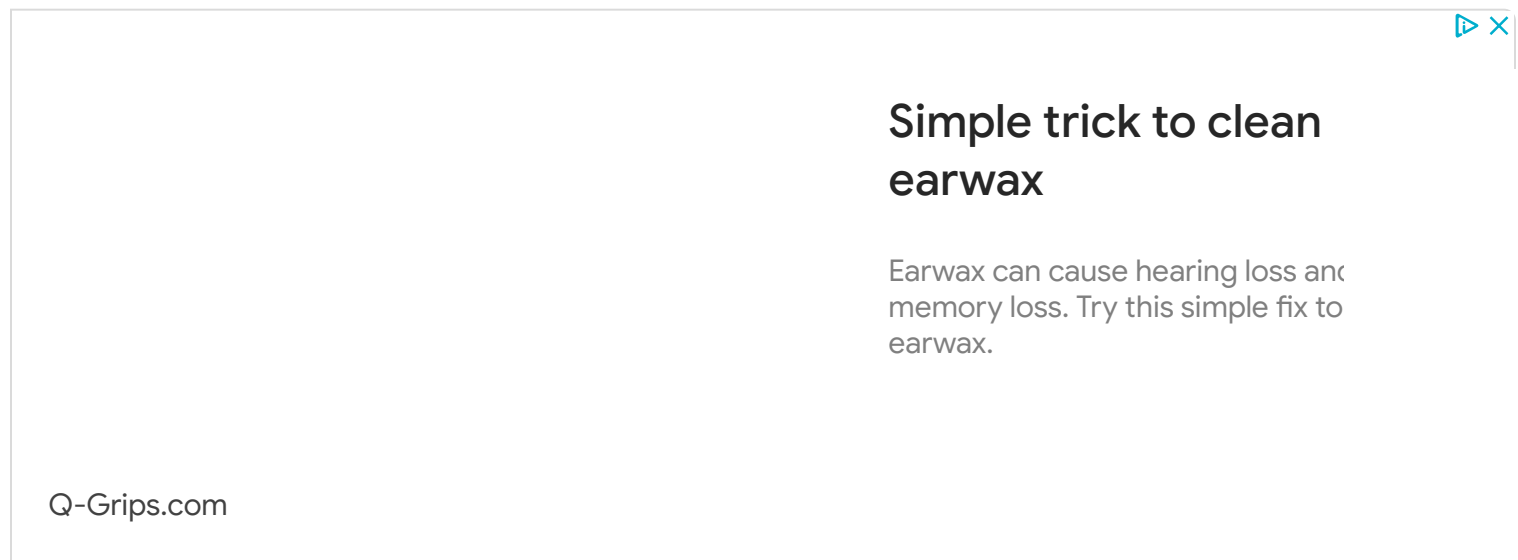
“I have so many memories and emotions attached to that building, as do many of my college friends,” Jessie wrote in a recent Facebook post, one that spawned a chain of responses

from old friends playfully recalling youthful indiscretions and good times.

Garrett, with its peculiar smells, 1960s-era vinyl couches and quirky janitors who'd hide your shoes if you dozed too deeply in the lobby, was their playground.

When the news reached Jessie's ears that Garrett was to be demolished, possibly by the end of the summer, it hit her "like a wrecking ball," she wrote, pun intended.

Last week, WKU received bids for razing Garrett Conference Center, which WKU Chief Facilities Officer Bryan Russell said will hopefully occur before students return for classes in the fall. He said the university wants to start demolition by mid-June.



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Eventually, what remains will be transformed into green space atop WKU's hill, though precise plans are still under development with an architect firm, Russell said.

Razing another ancient structure – Tate Page Hall – was slated to commence Tuesday, Russell said. The site will also become green space, enhancing WKU's South Lawn, though it is the

most coveted spot for a new business college the university eventually wants to build. That project will likely take several more years to begin and complete, Russell said.

Like all old, well-worn buildings remodeled and repurposed over the years, Garrett is a patchwork. It features a large, second-floor lobby anchored by an information desk, and the sweeping “ballroom” on the third floor was one of its earliest additions (Here, Jessie once danced barefoot to Nervous Melvin and the Mistakes during one of their shows in her junior year.).

Its cafeteria, situated in a stuffy, basement-like setting on the ground floor, was its biggest draw for students. The glossy new WKU Commons, slated to open for students this fall in the revamped Helm Library, put an end to that.

In Jessie’s day, Garrett was a hub, almost literally housing the university’s student newspaper staff, the College Heights Herald. Jessie recalls spending more time in the newspaper’s office than at her dorm or class (though most of her classes were either there or in the nearby Gordon Wilson Hall.)



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Monday and Wednesday evenings – production nights for the Herald – often stretched until 2 or 3 a.m. There was no desktop publishing, and computers were something of a novelty. REM's "Life's Rich Pageant" or "Murmur" set the vibe. For Jessie, the albums are portals to those nights.

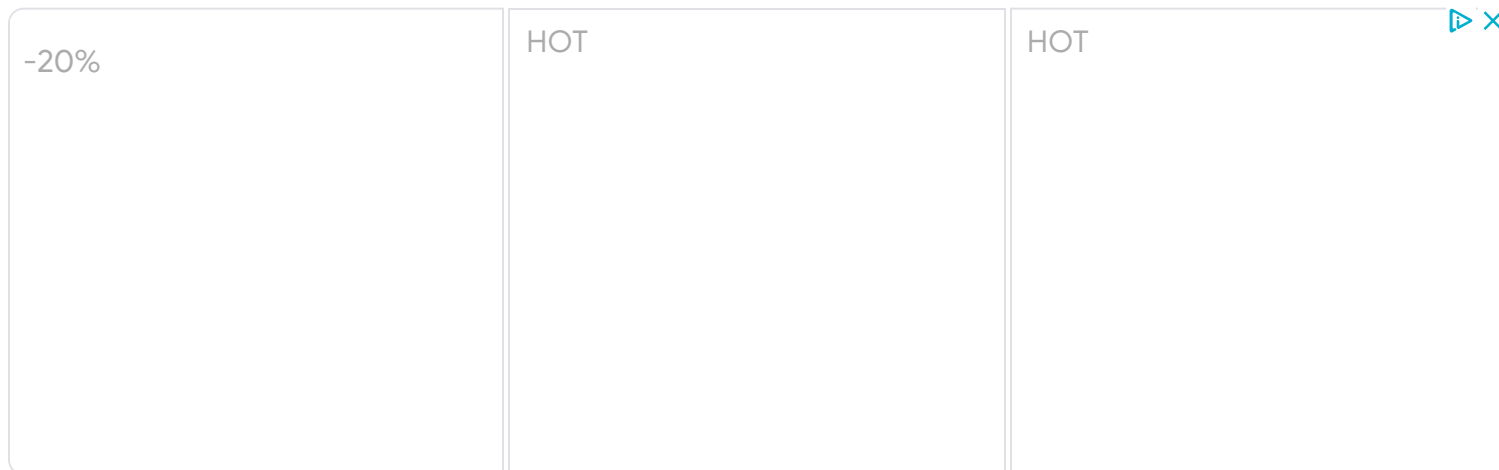
"Stories were printed out in columns that we waxed, sliced and diced to fit areas of the pages," Jessie recalled. "We felt like we were lucky if we wrapped production in time to get to Reno's for some late-night wings."

The late nights took their toll. Jessie can remember struggling to stay awake in the only 8 a.m. course she ever took, "a basic reporting class, I think," she joked.

The next semester, she took Jim Highland's public affairs reporting class. Highland wanted his students to be ready for the unbridled chaos of a real newsroom, Jessie said. So one of his assignments involved inviting upperclassmen to gab (read: heckle) his students as they pluckily pressed on to file their story in one hour. To this day, Jessie can work amid commotion, she said, able to carve out her own eye of the storm.

"C'mon, people! This ain't no weekly!" Jessie remembers Highland barking.

Once, after falling asleep for a little too long on one of Garrett's inviting vinyl couches, the custodian stole her shoes and hid them.



Happy Things for the Home

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Life in Garrett had its ups and downs. Jessie remembers occasionally breaking down into tears over what she now views as the smallest trivialities, a mistake in a caption, a headline that wouldn't come, whether the reporters she supervised secretly hated her. She remembers the building staff, including a concerned lunch lady who asked her if she was OK after spying Jessie in tears.

Jessie is a pragmatist. She knows that all things have their season, and a decrepit building that has outlived its usefulness is no exception.

Still, she can't shake the feeling that the old campus that once felt so familiar is withering away, choked out by shiny new cupola motifs. Jessie knows what fades and what endures.

"They can raze the building, but they can't raze the memories that were created there and the friendships that were forged there," she told the Daily News.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @NewsByAaron or visit bgdailynews.com.

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