

An Exploration of "Senior Privileges"

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Every school in our nation, regardless of whether it is a public or a private institution, has its own unique set of social codes students adopt without being prodded from the school administration. Now, I cannot speak with specificity in regard to the vast majority of schools throughout our nation, but I am going to make an educated guess and assume that there must exist some sort of stigmatized action or at least an unwritten code of social or physical conduct at all schools. These unwritten codes are essential to living as a student in high school, as in many cases they can set the tone of an entire high-school experience.

At St. Mark's there exists a colorful variety of unwritten social codes, some of which are seldom spoken of, that shape the way in which students go about living their lives. I could go on for numerous pages describing some of the rather generic social codes that exist here, such as those relating to style of dress and general social conduct, but I would like to instead focus on a particular set of social "rules" that is somewhat unique to St. Mark's, namely our set of "senior privileges".

"Senior privileges" is an often-referenced umbrella term used to categorize a set of special privileges given exclusively to seniors at St. Mark's. While these rules are held in high reverence among the vast majority students, in some cases more so than actual rules outlined in our student handbook, the school administration has no solidified role in enforcing them.

There are five principal senior "privileges" that we as St. Mark's live by on a daily basis. The first and most prominent one is the opportunity to set foot upon the "6th form quad". This quad is a beautiful, manicured green at the very front of our school that is surrounded on three sides by our main school building, the fourth side running adjacent to a set of cloisters and an arch leading to the front circle of our school. This quad, with dimensions of about 100x300 feet, serves as a recreational area for seniors; during the spring seniors can be seen either lounging or tossing Frisbees upon this quad at any hour of the day. Underformers may set foot upon the quad, but only with direct permission and supervision from a member of the senior class.

The second of the senior privileges, in order of personal relevance, is the opportunity to eat upon the coveted "senior platform" in our dining hall. Located in the back of our spacious, antiquated dining room, the "platform" is an (approximately) 15ft x 40 ft. area within which the hardwood floor is elevated by about a foot or so. In this area there are four long, parallel rectangular tables lined in a row, and there are large glass windows at each end of the platform, which overlook local scenery. Underclassmen are not completely exempt from dining on the platform, but they may only do so with: a) verbal consent from a member of the senior class, and b) at least one member of the senior class to accompany them on the platform for the entire duration of the underclassman's use of the platform.

The third most relevant senior privilege at St. Mark's is the routine early dismissal of seniors along with faculty members from community seated meals, chapel services, and assemblies in our performing arts center. At the end of each of these events, our head of school will rise and will belt out the phrase "faculty and sixth form!", signaling that it is time for our early departure. The seniors and faculty arise, and once they have all made their way to the dorm all other forms will arise in procession.

The fourth most relevant senior privilege is access to coveted seats in our chapel during our all-school chapel services. In our school chapel, the pews run perpendicular to our altar and face inward towards a central aisle that connects to the front door of our chapel. Additionally, these pews are slightly elevated in an amphitheater style. The farthest back row on both the right and the left sides of the chapel, looking from the front door, are partitioned, roomy seats backed by ornate wooden paneling. These seats are known as "senior seats", and at each chapel service these seats are reserved exclusively members of the senior class.

The fifth most relevant senior privilege is uninterrupted access to the Parkman room—which, ironically, I am sitting in as I write this very sentence—a small, preserved section of our original library. All students are welcome to use this room throughout the day, but during evening study hours it is exclusively for the use of seniors.

The sixth, and what I consider to be the least significant and least enforced senior privilege, is access to a narrow staircase right next to our chapel that connects our two main building boys dormitories, Sawyer and Coe, to the first floor of our school. This is the senior privilege that I take advantage of most often, as it allows me to cut my commute to our required, bi-weekly morning chapel services by about a minute or two, thus allowing me to enjoy one to two more minutes of valuable time to sleep on given mornings. Like other privileges, use of these stairs by an underformer traditionally requires permission from a senior, but I am pretty sure that underformers have begun to ignore this privilege.

I have noticed that, over the course of my four years at St. Mark's, these privileges have become less instrumental to life at St. Mark's and overall less respected. I make this statement both in the observation that underclassman access to these privileges has become more lenient, and that my senior class is taking significantly less initiative in terms of supporting and enforcing these privileges than previous classes.

During my freshman year, it was acceptable to occasionally host an underformer on the quad or on the platform, but over the years it has become increasingly acceptable to invite large quantities of underclassmen into these sacred areas. Whereas during my freshmen year it would be a rather unusual for an underclassman to be invited onto the dining hall platform, I now, as a senior, sometimes cannot find a place to sit on the platform because there may be an entire athletic team of underclassmen, accompanied by a senior or two, taking up an entire table.

Additionally, as I have pointed out, the ways in which the senior class enforces and defends these privileges has changed to a noticeable extent. This change is most identifiable in the way in which seniors enforce access to the senior quad. During my freshman year, if an underclassmen were to even set a single toe on the quad in pursuit of a lost ball (cloister ball is a traditional game at St. Mark's, and it involves hitting support beams within the cloisters... which happen to be located adjacent to the senior quad), a mistake that I have personally made in the past, it would be a matter of seconds before a senior, while sitting in their dorm three floors above the quad, would stick their head out of the window, stare into your soul, and scream "get off the quad!!!" This would occur more often than one might think; I was screeched on nearly a daily basis for the duration of my freshman orientation. It did not matter what time of day it was; there was always a senior ready to scare my pants off.

Fast forward to senior year and neither I nor any of my friends have yet to yell at an underformer for setting foot on the quad. I can recall on multiple occasions when I have seen a new student lose a tennis ball to the quad, walk to get it, and return to the cloisters without any senior-retaliation. Additionally, I have seen underclassmen freely walk across the quad in order to take minor shortcuts. While this observed difference represents only a small aspect of our school's spectrum of senior privileges, it shows an immense change in student conduct regarding the enforcement of and respect for these privileges.

In my opinion, the change in the way in which these privileges are acted upon and perceived by the student body is most likely due to our attempt as an institution to modernize. Throughout my years at St. Mark's, my peers and I have been encouraged to become more mindful of those around us and adopt practices of personal conduct geared towards building a community of mutual respect among all students. As we begin to intensify our institutional efforts to progress socially, the more antiquated, adverse traditions of our school, such as our senior privileges, become less relevant. Personally, as a member of the senior class, I find value both in these traditional privileges as well as our efforts to modernize, yet given the nature of the times that we live in, the social "codes" and other customs that we recognize may begin to change, whether we like it or not. Overall, our school community appears to be successfully adopting a new social ideology, and as a result "the old" is being done away with in order to create space for "the new".