

# Sass: a necessary commitment to excellence

"Murray Burns, you're not a man, you're an experience!" —*"A Thousand Clowns"*

Dr. Ronald A. Sass has reached a landmark in the career of the head master of a Rice residential college: the first year is over.

His first year has been an unusual one—more than this, it has been an exemplary one—and the awakened pride of the members of Hanszen College reflects the admiration they feel for their new master.

## Vitality

Sass, a professor of chemistry in his spare time, replaced Hanszen's master of nine years' standing, Dr. William Masterson. Masterson had been one of the founding fathers of the college system, a competent and respected administrator, who had built an image for Hanszen College as a somewhat conservative but always "gentlemanly" residential hall.

Into the void that was left when Masterson departed, Sass began to infuse a new spirit of youthful vitality, enthusiasm, and, most important, a receptiveness to new ideas—no matter how implausible they might sound.

For the first time, college members felt a sense of identification with a master. Once the initial rapport was established, the members of Hanszen realized that the lines of communication were working in an unprecedented fashion, and the support for Sass grew into an almost fanatical enthusiasm.

## Artistic Sensibilities

Warren Skaaren, a Hanszen sophomore, was one of the first to sense that Sass was the type of imaginative person who might swallow a plan to transform a filthy, dusty attic into a coffee house for the University.

Skaaren commented, "Sass has enough of the artistic quality about him to say 'Why not try something different? What the hell if it falls through?' He's not afraid of experimentation, simply because something exciting may grow out of it."

Today the Hanszen Coffee House has become a popular spot for Rice people to meet and talk with each other in a relaxed atmosphere. And the "dreamers" of Hanszen College feel they have found a champion.

## Newness of Ideas

"The great thing about Sass is that he's a learner," noted Skaaren. "He's easy to identify with in this way. He doesn't give you the image of the all-knowing one, but comes across as someone eager to uncover the newness of ideas."

When Sass doesn't personally provide the impetus for projects like the coffee house and KHCR, the new Hanszen College radio station, he at least establishes the vital atmosphere in which hazy concepts

can grow to fruition and become viable entities.

His concerns are not located solely in that small portion of Rice University which Hanszen College occupies. This year he spearheaded a program, which became known as the "Hanszen Plan," to move the educational processes into the structure of the college.

## Curriculum Plan

The plan was to have a series of seminar courses in the college, which would be loosely structured and ungraded. The academicians would take science and math courses in seminar, and the science student would take courses out of his field in a similar setup.

Sass is hoping that some phase of this plan will be adopted. His efforts may have laid the groundwork for some vital and necessary changes in the concept of education at Rice.

But the majority of Sass' time, that



DR. RONALD A. SASS  
Year of Achievement

which he can spare from his ever-increasing work load in the chemistry department, is spent in the college with his wife Joyce and two daughters, Denise and Andrea; with the horde of college members that just want to "shoot the bull" with him; and with a few loyal colleagues such as Dr. Ronald Magid of the Chemistry Department, a Hanszen associate who plays a Robin to Sass' Batman.

## Open to Innovation

Sass takes an active concern in the governmental affairs of the college. Julius Sensat, Hanszen's newly elected president, notes "Sass is open to ideas. He'll come to all the cabinet meetings and work with you, not against you."

"He makes you feel at ease. You don't

have to maintain a strict formal relationship with Dr. Sass, for he doesn't have ten years of 'tradition' behind him to close his mind to innovation. Most important, he treats you as an equal."

Sass has shown a great concern to involve all the members of Hanszen in the running of the college. He often comes to individual rooms to discuss college business or simply to have a beer with some of the students, and invites members of the college into his home continually.

## Versatility of Interests

Because of all these activities in the college, he worries about his academic commitments, thus facing the problem common to all the masters. The only answer seems to be an all-consuming schedule, with little, if any, time for leisure.

Yet in his spare moments, he relaxes by playing the guitar, painting with water colors, reading (incessantly). "Who else would be reading 'The Golden Bough' and 'The Painted Bird' at the same time," commented one college member. The general feeling is that Sass is "up" on every conceivable topic.

Through it all, there have been problems, but mostly of a minor nature. Several members of the government admit that they are sometimes wary about trying something which they know Sass openly disapproves of. Many members, feeling things are going too well, are concerned about "pressing our luck" for fear that there might be a tightening of authority.

## Fears of Confrontation

Yet, fears such as these arise from the newness of Sass' mastership and his ideas, a liberality that some members find it difficult to accustom themselves to. No major division of opinion has occurred in the college during this first year of Sass' mastership, but most of the people in the college place trust in his equitability and open-mindedness.

If the time comes that he must yield on a major issue, the belief is that he will do so without trying to take retributive action against the government.

The successes of his inaugural year are there, and they are an impressive lot. But the greatest changes are not material ones, but the intangible change that has come over the members of Hanszen College, a sense of mutual purpose which had been severely lacking in the past.

The question of direction is one that arises: is Hanszen seeking to become Fun College, or the college of educational innovation, or what? Under Sass, it probably can define itself in a vast number of areas.

For Sass, like Murray Burns, is not simply a master.

He's an experience.

—By PHIL GARON