

Ed Hamilton '89GA

Writing Well in the CHELSEA HOTEL

When UofL graduate Ed Hamilton and his girlfriend, Debbie Martin, moved to New York City in 1995, their first stop was the legendary Chelsea Hotel—a place Hamilton calls the city's "Rebel Mecca."

This was no pilgrimage. The couple has lived at the Chelsea ever since. Because if you're going to move to New York to pursue writing, you might as well live in a place where the creative juices course through the halls like blood through the arteries. For so many of the artists, writers, bohemians, exhibitionists and lunatics who have lived there throughout the decades, the Chelsea Hotel is a living, breathing thing.

For Ed Hamilton—not to be confused with the well-known Louisville sculptor and UofL grad of the same name—it's a home that has provided both the inspiration and subject matter for his first novel, *Legends of the Chelsea Hotel*.

"It's a book of anecdotes—basically the story of our lives there," says Hamilton, a Louisville native who earned his master's in philosophy from UofL in 1989. "It also delves into the history a lot too. It's an eclectic mixture of different things, kind of like the Chelsea itself."

It wasn't a spark of creative fire that inspired the book, Hamilton admits. It was a *real* fire.

"We were walking home from dinner and we saw fire trucks lining the street. There was a fire in the Chelsea and everybody was coming down from their rooms—all of these artists and writers hanging out in the lobby. We began passing around a bottle of wine and telling our stories. We talked about what a shame it would be if the Chelsea would just pass away without someone documenting it in some way. That's when we decided to do the blog."

Hamilton began contributing the weekly "Slice of Life" column to www.hotelchelseablog.com. The book grew naturally out of that.

"It was a way to gather information," he says. "A lot of people came to us and told us about their projects. We interviewed them and got their histories. I was just going to write a year's worth of stories—discussing all the crazy people I've met there over the years and all the strange incidents. After a year, I didn't see any reason to stop. It was interesting, and I never ran out ideas."

Over time, Hamilton's columns began sorting themselves into different categories. He then hired an agent who helped him shape the material further and suggested that he bring in some

more history, which always seems to come up when discussing the hotel.

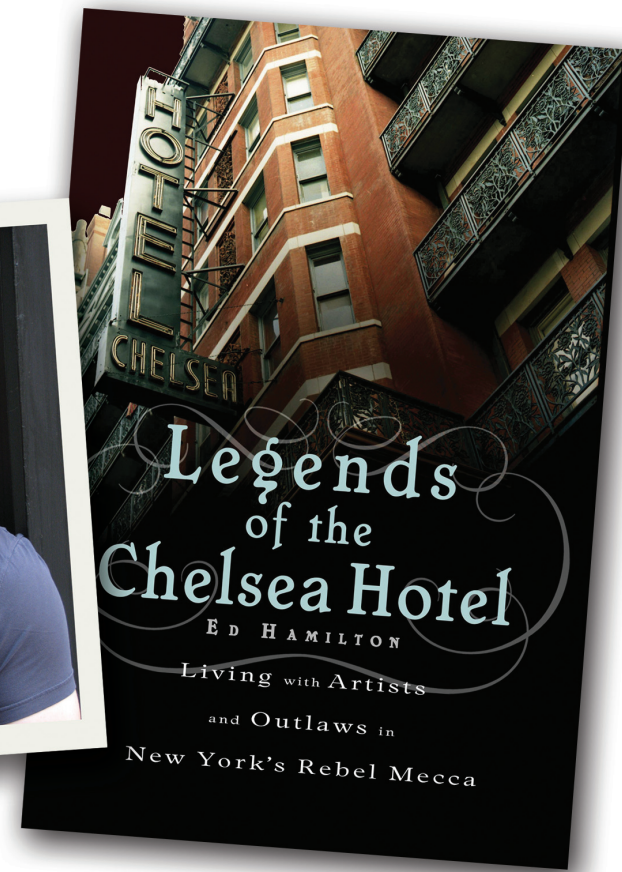
"People always mention Thomas Wolfe or William Burroughs or Andy Warhol. The history is just a common subject of conversation, and it has an influence too on the people who live there to kind of live up to the example that's been created.

"That's what the book is about—how the history influences the present-day residents."

How could it not? The Chelsea is where Thomas Wolfe wrote *You Can't Go Home Again*, where William Burroughs wrote *Naked Lunch*, where Andy Warhol made the film *Chelsea Girls* and Leonard Cohen wrote the song "Chelsea Hotel #2." It's where the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas died at age 39 and where Nancy Spungen, the girlfriend of Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious, was found stabbed to death in 1978.

"It's amazing what you turn up as you start to research the place," Hamilton says. "Everyday you learn something new. Bob Marley used to stay there back in the 60s before the Wailers. Janis Joplin stayed there. The Grateful Dead played a concert on the roof one time in the 60s.

"You pick up bits here and there. There's never been a real history of the hotel. Somehow it doesn't lend itself to that."



Hamilton says the Chelsea was a haven for creative types from its beginning. When it was built in 1883 as a luxury apartment co-op, it was surrounded by opera houses and theaters. At the time, 23rd Street was the heart of Manhattan's theater district—before the district gradually moved up to Time Square. The French stage actress Sarah Bernhardt, known in the late 19th century as "the most famous actress in the world," stayed at the Chelsea. The famous American actress and singer Lillian Russell also stayed there during the early days.

The Chelsea became a hotel in 1904. An important moment in its history came in 1957 when a young Stanley Bard took over management of the hotel from his father. Hamilton describes Bard, who was fired by the Chelsea board of directors this past summer after 50 years, as a sort of impresario of the Chelsea.

"Everybody has a theory about the creative current that flows through the building," Hamilton says. "Part of it is

Stanley and the collection of people he has assembled—all of these eccentric writers and artists coming together and just playing off each other. They're not all writers and artists. Some of them are just plain crazy."

Hamilton says he has never had writer's block while living there.

"There's always something going on," he says. "In fact, there's too much going on down in the lobby. You can't sit there for long or else you'll get engaged in some sort of wild intrigue."

His 12-year stay at the Chelsea has been during a transformative period in the hotel's history, when it has changed "from a drug-infested flop-house to something that is a little more gentrified, something a lot easier to take," Hamilton says. "Which is a good thing in some ways, but then there's the foreboding of things—driving out the artists and just turning into a boutique hotel.

"In a way—it's the passing of an old way of life." ■

IN ADDITION TO alumni, "People" honors students, faculty and staff—the individuals who make UofL a dynamic and diverse academic community.

Actors Theatre of Louisville recently honored 11 "Women of Spunk" in conjunction with its production of *Spunk*, a stage adaptation of three Zora Neale Hurston short stories celebrating the enduring strength of the human spirit. The women were recognized for overcoming personal hardships and making a difference in the community. Of the 11 women chosen, nine have ties to UofL:

Elmer Lucille Allen MC, 02A is a clay artist and community volunteer. When Brown-Forman hired her in 1966 she was the company's first African American chemist and one of only three women working in the chemistry lab. A charter member of Arts Council of Louisville, Allen also developed Kentucky's first African American Arts Directory and founded the Afro-American Coalition for Artists. She now curates the Wayside Expressions Gallery.

Nana Yaa Asantewaa 76A is an award-winning storyteller who has preserved the African oral tradition as "Storyteller Mama Yaa" for more than 35 years. She also is an artist, playwright and workshop facilitator and the founder and president emerita of Arts Council of Louisville.

Fran L. Berg 00A founded the Kentucky Breast Cancer Alliance, which raised money for the breast cancer program at UofL's James Graham Brown Cancer Center. She also led efforts to create the breast cancer license plate and income tax check-off, which established the Kentucky Breast Cancer Research and Education Trust Fund. KBCA eventually merged with the Brown Cancer Center, and Berg continues to work with the organization. She also owns Divas, a women's boutique.

Mary Craik AD owns Craik Gallery. In 1994 she established a UofL scholarship in her name with damages from a class action sex discrimination suit. It has funded degrees for 35 women to date. Craik taught psychology and women's studies at St. Cloud University in

by Kevin Hyde