

## Only students can truly end hazing - CNN.com

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COURTESY FLORIDA A&M UNIVERSITY

Florida A&M University student Robert Champion, 26, who, an autopsy found, "died within an hour of a hazing incident."

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(CNN) -- In November 2010, I watched "HBO's Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel" and saw a piece on the hazing antics at several historically black colleges and fraternities. I took to Twitter to share my thoughts on the issue.

Much of the report focused on Southern University, and man, did the floodgates open as a number of students from the university angrily tweeted me back, cussing, yelling and screaming, with some defending hazing, while others were angry at the national attention focused on their university.

For hours we went round and round, and were joined in the discussion by members of several black fraternities, including my own Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. A number of these individuals actually supported hazing, or "pledging hard" and not becoming a "paper" member who "skated" into the fraternity.

Despite the anger and vitriol, I refused to back down, making it clear that getting beaten for being in a band or fraternity was absolutely dumb.

One year later, when news of the death of Florida A&M University drum major Robert Champion became public, I immediately thought of that discussion and those folks who viewed hazing as a ritual worthy of continuing.

Here was a young man who went off to college, planning to earn a college degree while leading one of the nation's most colorful and exciting bands, only to be returned home to his parents in Georgia in a coffin.

While hazing immediately was suspected, we could only speculate about the cause of the 26-year-old's death. That is, until Friday, when the medical examiner released details of his autopsy, concluding that Champion "collapsed and died within an hour of a hazing incident during which he suffered multiple blunt trauma blows to his body."

Parents of slain drum major speak

News of the death has rocked the Florida A&M campus, angering its students and alumni, triggering multiple state

investigations and leading Gov. Rick Scott to call for the suspension of school President James Ammons. That prompted FAMU students to march to the governor's mansion on Friday and camp out on his lawn, demanding he rescind the resignation call.



Champion's death isn't the first time we have seen individuals in a band or fraternity die. It is incredible that some folks have given their lives -- literally -- for just being a part of a student group.

State laws have been passed, organizations have been kicked off campuses and national fraternal and sorority groups have paid millions in settlements because of hazing, but we continue to see these stories.

"Why?" is a consistent question that is asked, and at the end of the day, it boils down to power and a desire to demand others kowtow to someone else's demands in order for them to be accepted.

A decision not to follow through means you can be ostracized, ignored and marginalized. That's the last thing any young person wants to experience when in an organization.

Every one of these organizations is overseen by adult leaders or advisers. But in truth, fellow students run the show. Normally in a band, a drum major sits at the top of the food chain, but Champion clearly had to bend to the band's culture to be fully accepted as a member of FAMU's "Marching 100."

So what you have is a bunch of students between the ages of 18 and 22 calling the shots and making it clear who is accepted and who isn't, who gets in and who doesn't. You aim to please them and no one else. Oftentimes they are leading based on how they were led, and it has been indoctrinated into them that this is the way of life, take it or leave it.

These are powerful forces that can only be changed by peers. Hazing will only be brought to a close when members of organizations make it clear the vile hazing traditions will not go forward. No one today can be hazed if the student leaders make it clear that it's unacceptable. Yet because of the natural turnover in student organizations, that mindset has to be created and passed on for it to succeed.

When I was about to pledge Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. in spring 1989, I met with my four other pledge brothers and made it clear: I'm not getting hit, I will never use alcohol and I will not agree to be hazed.

Even though my older brother pledged the same fraternity at Texas A&M two years earlier without any nonsense, I was making it clear that such shenanigans were idiotic. All five of us agreed and in the four weeks, two days, 16 hours, 38 minutes and 39 seconds I was on line (yea, having to recite such specifics was a part of our process), the behavior that we often heard was associated with pledging didn't exist.

Yet because of that, we weren't always as accepted by other fraternity members at other campuses. Our chapter was called soft; we were criticized as not "pledging the right way" and had to constantly defend our manhood.

Me, I didn't give a damn. I would look others in the eye and say, "In the history of our chapter, only one brother has failed to graduate, and we do nothing with him. Are you guys on the six- or seven-year plan, and can you match our graduate rate?"

From my perspective, we were supposed to be in college to graduate, not to pledge. And if my fraternity was

founded as a study group at Cornell University on December 4, 1906, why would we eschew academics?

Even though we pledged the right way at Texas A&M, that peer pressure was still unbearable for some. That summer at our national convention in San Antonio, hazing was on the agenda, and I made it clear I was going to speak. Some other brothers in my chapter pulled my coattails and said, "Don't tell the brothers you didn't take any wood (that's being paddled)."

I yelled, "If we pledged brothers the right way, why in the hell are we afraid to say it?"

Since those days, I've never wavered from my anti-hazing position. It is deplorable and shameful to think that someone would beat another person for them to prove something. Prove what? They can take a punch? No. I prefer to challenge his mind, his intellect.

Our goal as fraternity men is to take young men and mold and shape them to be better men. It is not our aim to take young men and train them to be collegiate mercenaries, hellbent on inflicting as much pain as they got onto the first person they have control over.

Is there tremendous value in fraternities, sororities, bands and student organizations? Absolutely. The leadership opportunities are tremendous, and the lifelong relationships are vital.

But what has to be preached and preached and preached to every student, whether they are white, black, Asian, Latino, male or female, is that if they love that frat, sorority, drill team or band, they shouldn't do anything to jeopardize it for the next person.

Do we need tougher hazing laws? Yes. Do we need universities to take punitive action, including kicking students out who break the rules? Yes. Do we need national organizations to ban chapters for years for egregious behavior? Absolutely. Should fellow student leaders turn in others who break the rules and haze? Of course. There must be a zero tolerance attitude from every state official, administrator, student leader and organization member. To hell with tradition, rituals and "the way we do things." All that must end. Now.

But we also must raise a generation of young people who have enough confidence in themselves to say, "I will not take a beating just to be accepted by you. I'd rather not have your affection or support if it means putting my life on the line."

And if that means other students calling you out or teasing you, fine. I'd rather you talk about me like a dog today than be hazed and have my friends search to figure out what to say at my funeral.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Roland Martin.