

December 9, 2011

The Brutal Side of Hazing

By CHARLES M. BLOW

The tragic loss of Robert Champion may be another sad case of a college student literally dying to belong.

Champion, a drum major for Florida A&M University's famous marching band, died on a bus a few weeks ago after a performance. **The suspected culprit:** physical hazing, a behavior that's proving remarkably resistant to being scrubbed from our culture.

His death refocuses attention on college hazing and illustrates just how pervasive and intractable the problem can be, how rooted it is into some organizations, how far some will go to belong and feel bonded and how some officials can seem to turn a blind eye — publicly disavowing and condemning while silently condoning.

I know this behavior well because I was once a willing participant. I was first paddled when I pledged a fraternity in college. It was one of our first meetings as a pledge group and the brothers were working their way through a line of us from shortest to tallest. Eventually they got to me. No. 13.

I moved to the center of the room and assumed the position. I stared straight ahead. I tried to brace myself for the blow, but nothing could have prepared me.

Swat!

The force of the impact nearly knocked me over. I rose on my toes to keep from falling forward. The pain of it crackled through my thin body. My vision blurred. The sound in the room grew muted as if I was listening from underwater. My temples throbbed. My nostrils flared. My nose ran and my eyes watered despite my best efforts to prevent it. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. I was on fire. My body demanded that I scream, run, cry, do something. But I knew that I could do nothing. I stood firm.

"Thanks — may I have another?"

That is the way it is often portrayed in movies and literature. Orderly. But that was only an introduction, a test. The hazing sessions quickly accelerated to dangerous affairs beyond imagination or comprehension.

We would experience nearly two months of bleeding and bruises, harassment and terror, dehydration and nausea.

Virtually every connection with the outside world was severed. The beatings became more frequent and more severe. Some pledges broke and cried, others flinched and cowered. Others stepped up and stood tall,

toeing the line for those who couldn't.

The point was to test our mettle, to lay bare the depths of our character and commitment, to break the individuals so that the group could be built — amalgamated from the debris of our former selves.

All the language surrounding hazing was couched in that kind of grandiosity and nobility. The dangers involved were never discussed. No one gave voice to the fact that it was against the rules and possibly against the law. No one stopped and thought. We simply drifted forward, moved along by the momentum of a thing done because it had always been done.

One of the most brutal sessions was dedicated to breaking the breakable, to forcing anyone who couldn't withstand the beatings to leave the pledge group. It was called "Turn Back Night."

That session took place in a secluded, mudhole-pocked oil field. As the pump-jacks bobbed and creaked, we were subjected to an unfettered, gladiator-style hazing session so brutal it almost defies description.

The night air was punctuated by the swats of paddles, boards and even two-by-fours, by slaps of hands on flesh, by groans of pain from pledges, and by shouts of profanity from brothers who'd lost themselves in the frenzy and were caught in a chaotic feedback loop of alcohol and adrenaline.

And we weren't Animal House-like alcoholics and louses. We were campus leaders. The fraternity prided itself on receiving the high-G.P.A. award, and I was the freshman class president.

Still, legends were to be made by the brothers who were most inventive, brutal or relentless, or by pledges who never flinched or cried aloud.

The rules were simple but unwritten: no facial marks or serious injuries. Of course, there is no real way of enforcing such rules when boys are swinging two-by-fours at other boys by the light of the moon. Luckily, my group survived without serious injury. But that's unfortunately not always the case. Hazing is inherently dangerous and sometimes deadly.

And it runs deep. It lives in legacy.

The band director at Florida A&M warned two decades ago in a letter about hazing that "it would be very difficult for the university and the band should someone become killed or hurt."

Yet here we are with the school's president, James Ammons, having to release the following statement on Nov. 29: "It is becoming increasingly clear that hazing continues to exist — at FAMU and across the country at other universities, colleges and other elements — because hazing survives and thrives in a culture of secrecy and a conspiracy of silence."

The silence is the challenge. A 2008 study by researchers at the University of Maine found that most college students involved in clubs, teams and organizations experience hazing, but 95 percent never report it. I certainly didn't.

This is compounded by the fact that many members of these groups see the tactic as flawed but effective. It separates the weak from the strong. It's a forced group trauma for the pledges, and that has a bonding effect. And those hazed often see it as a test of toughness, taking a perverse pride in their perseverance.

But that's not worth the price paid. Any perceived good will always be outweighed by injuries and measured against dead bodies. There are other ways to provide bonding experiences without barbaric physical and psychological trauma.

When I view what we did with a mature mind and enlightened eyes, it seems insane. But, in the moment, as a young man, it seemed to be a perfectly reasonable rite of passage. And that is the attitude that must be changed. It's not reasonable. It's ridiculous.

We must end the "conspiracy of silence."

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