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Lawsuit Shatters Code of Silence Over Hazing at Black Fraternities

By PETER APPLEBOME,
 Published: December 21, 1994

Somewhere between being beaten with a cane so hard that it broke, and between being pummeled, poked with needles and branded on his arms and chest with a red-hot iron, Wardell Pride had a numbing thought.

"This is what slave masters did to slaves," he said of the initiation process at the all-black Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity at Tennessee State University here. "And my only true reward was that I have an opportunity to be a slave master as many times as I want when it's all over."

Hazing, in both white and black fraternities, is one of the perennial ills of college life. And while hazing at white fraternities -- particularly in the form of alcohol abuse -- remains an enormous problem, officers of black fraternities say that, four years after violent hazing was banned, the practice persists to such a degree that it has become a threat to their fraternities' existence.

"We have too frequently remained silent while renegade members have openly and defiantly harassed, humiliated and committed physical violence on men seeking membership into Kappa Alpha Psi," Robert L. Harris,

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national grand polemarch, or president, of Kappa Alpha Psi recently wrote in a confidential bulletin to members.

He continued: "We cannot enter the 21st century with this self-destructive mindset that one must suffer, whether mentally or physically, to subscribe to our motto of achievement. This mindset has put our fraternity on the doorsteps of annihilation."

Mr. Pride, a 24-year-old senior who pledged the fraternity in 1991 and later became chapter president and one of the 12 regional coordinators for Kappa Alpha Psi, sued his fraternity in October, maintaining that fraternity officers knew of the violent hazing and failed to take adequate steps to prevent it.

His lawsuit, along with recent incidents, including the hazing death of a Kappa Alpha Psi pledge at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, provides revealing, and sometimes chilling, details about hazing practices long shrouded in secrecy.

"There's a conspiracy of silence," said John Williams, director of the Academic Intervention Office at historically black Tennessee State and a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, one of the nation's eight black fraternities.

"The fraternities tend not to want to talk about the fact that they have not put their house in order."

Dr. Williams, who interviewed fraternity members around the country for a dissertation on the reaction to the new pledging procedures adopted in 1990, is convinced that the national fraternities are committed to ending hazing, if only because of the mounting lawsuits. But he said that the decentralized nature of black fraternities, the degree to which undergraduate chapters can chafe at the leadership of alumni chapters, and the traditions of initiation by hazing have left the practice largely intact.

In an interview and in his lawsuit, which is supported by affidavits from

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five other fraternity members at Tennessee State, Mr. Pride described ritualized physical abuse meted out in "heat sessions" that lasted several hours.

In an activity called "the cut," each pledge would bend over, grab his left ankle with his right hand and cover his crotch with his left hand, and would then be beaten with a wooden cane.

In one called "bringing the knowledge," a pledge is required to bow his head while either standing or kneeling. A fraternity member would then stand on top of a chair or bed with a dictionary or other large book in his hand and jump down, slamming the book onto the pledge's head.

At other times, pledges were punched repeatedly in the chest by members who used a knuckle to harden the blow until the pain became excruciating.

Mr. Pride and the other plaintiffs said fraternity members extorted substantial sums from them to pay for expenses like rent or car repairs.

In the last two years, Kappa Alpha Psi chapters at 35 colleges and universities have been disbanded or have had individual members suspended for hazing violations, according to the lawsuit. Earlier this year, the fraternity, which has 300 undergraduate chapters, suspended the admission of new members.

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