

## **Hazing and the College Student's Voice**

*This essay is dedicated to the memory of the late Robert Champion, 26-years old, native of Decatur, Georgia, who passed away as another victim of hazing on November 19, 2011. As a fellow band member who experienced the tragic death of another band member by car accident in September 2011, who was also buried in uniform, I am far more distressed by this man's preventable death. The entire band community mourns his unnecessary death and hopes for an end to hazing.*

In 1971 Stanford University conducted a psychology study in which college student volunteers helped simulate a prison environment to explore whether evil or humanity would triumph. The study was shut down after just six days out of the planned 14 because it had spiraled out of control. The volunteers, none of whom had a history of psychiatric disorders, assumed the roles of prison guard or prisoner in a disturbingly convincing manner. Prison guards abused prisoners by forcing them to strip down naked, sleep on floors, urinate and defecate in their cells, and do calisthenics at their will. The prisoners rarely complained, became trapped in the experiment, and feared only further abuse. Prisoners went so far as to sabotage one another in an attempt to be a "good" prisoner and receive rewards for their behavior. In 2011, the same mentality that drove the Stanford simulation to a screeching halt claimed the life of a drum major, Robert Champion, of the Florida A&M Marching Band, one of the most storied HBCU bands in the nation. Hazing is today's problem, today's Stanford prison. It is no experiment, but exists on college campuses across the country.

### **Hazing**

I put on a smile and wondered if they saw me for who I am. I sat down among the chattering Asian women at this quaint bubble tea shop on my college campus and introduced myself to the nearest Greek letter-wearing sister. Like many students across the nation, I had

determined going Greek would be a way to find a niche in college. I was joining for the peer group—children of Asian immigrants who understood my cultural background. I could not have cared less about the other factors, and myths about Greek life were foreign to me. It was the familiarity, the mutual support, and the maintenance of our culture that attracted me. Of the twenty or so interested women, bids were extended to six after an interview process. I was one of the six.

My pledge class asked me something. I was deep in thought during our “lock-in,” debating whether it was all worth it to stay despite the heavy cost. I shifted uncomfortably in the small single dorm room of my pledge sister and asked them to repeat the question. We had been locked in this small space intended for one for over six hours. Our laundry list of tasks to complete was not getting any shorter. I was struggling to see the point of these activities from an educational perspective. I should be studying organic chemistry instead. They wanted me to figure out how to present the poster to the sisters. I lay down on the cold, hard tiled floor and responded carefully. As pledge class President, I had little to no power relative to the active sisters, but my word was everything to these girls. We were all just pawns in their grand design. I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

Someone was moaning, loudly. The sniffing from a little while ago was bearable, but the crying was hard to take. Now moaning was echoing against the bare walls of this dank basement in which we were stuck. We were always stuck somewhere. I kept staring straight ahead, as instructed, careful not to arouse suspicion from the sisters splayed lazily across the couch just below my line of sight. Who were they to demand complete obedience? I thought about some of the insults they hurled at us. The focus was duty, finishing what we had started, not letting others down—all Asian values distorted and used as a means to an end. I felt the nausea creep

up my throat and the tears start to well up in my eyes as I remembered years of being forced to do what my parents dictated. Worst of all, I could not protect my class. I was entirely helpless. It was my turn to endure the physical pain—I willed my aching knees to bend and my burning thighs to hold my weight against the wall, drenched in my acrid sweat—and my neighbor began bawling under the psychological pain...all around was yelling, screaming, a thumping headache threatening explosion—darkening room covered in sparkling red stars: a physiological warning.

A ray of hope. She was absolutely gorgeous. She had a radiant smile, a tiny dimple in her right cheek, and a gentle voice that made me want to hug her. She was my Big Sister, a law student who showed up in person after a week of sending me gift after gift, note after note. She was dressed perfectly in a skirt suit; I had never seen anyone look so sophisticated. We were again led into the basement, but I knew she was on my side. We began a new activity. Tension built. Any minute now the remaining four of us would break. I was right. In the midst of it all I kept a cool head and listened for my angel. She never called. She watched just like the rest of them. Her halo dimmed, and then faded.

I was the advocate and I knew I had to do something. My class needed me to speak up and nobody else was doing it. I was tired of this wrong. There she was. The chapter president and I sat down in the dining hall and after the typical formalities I breached the difficult subject. “What you’re doing is wrong, don’t you know?” “It’s tradition.” “...This organization has been around for only 13 years.” “Well, there isn’t much we can do.” “There’s even less that I can do.” “When you become a sister you can figure it out.” I stared. I wanted to throw my tray in her face. In my mind I pictured the sisters who struggled when they watched, who had to excuse themselves, who pleaded with their “sisters” to stop to no avail. I could never be that weak. Three weeks after I became a pledge, I demanded that they let me leave. I left a changed woman.

It was the best decision of my life.

I was extended two more bids my freshman year and accepted the one to my current honorary band fraternity. I fight every day against what those sisters did to me and have the opportunity to teach others how unproductive hazing is through my leadership in a different Greek organization. I struggle with the memories, replaying them and analyzing them over and over again to search for more meaning. But the three years since I was hazed have allowed me to find out what passion means. The fury I expressed when faced with the reality of inaction drives me to get deeply involved in helping others. The value of service cannot be underestimated, whether for college bands, the psychological welfare of our college students, or the upholding of basic constitutional rights. It is easy to sit and watch, to bear the pain privately or simply pretend it is not occurring, but I believe in standing up for what is right.

### **Hazed**

Frequently, brothers in my fraternity, after hearing my story, ask me how I could have let other people tell me what to do. The answer to the question lies in the power differential between the sisters, who were active and had obtained the goal I sought, and me, a freshman who desperately wanted to join the sorority. As hopeful freshmen seeking admittance into a Greek organization, it is completely natural to do as one is told. The key to creating a gradual hazing environment is to have it escalate. The sisters who created this process were intelligent and had help from an already established Greek organization that did similar activities. By beginning the process in a positive way, then bringing out slowly the punishments, the severity of the later activities was greatly reduced. Furthermore, after the first time we were forced to do wall-sits, as depicted in this essay, we were rewarded with the discovery of our mentor, our Big Sister at a celebratory dinner. For many of my peers, this discovery overshadowed the pain of the event

itself at least temporarily. For me, it caused me further consternation as I saw only deception and hypocrisy.

College students are smart people who act in rational and sensitive ways, but as the Stanford study showed, specific situations bring out an ugly side. Once the initiation occurs, the new active sisters are overjoyed, but most of all they are relieved. No longer will they be in pain, no longer degraded constantly by actives that had control over their lives. Instead, they have freedom to do as they please—that is, until the next class of recruits begins their process. Nobody speaks out because there is a false sense of equality in place. The newly active sisters believe at first that they are now considered equals, but consider this: what kind of psychological shift occurred when the hazing first became apparent? A person cannot go from victim to equal overnight. Imagine the fear of a rape survivor towards her assailant. That same fear is present initially in the new active's mind. The result is the younger sister's submission to the older sister's will. It is the single most vicious cycle.

I hold a special place in the history of the sorority at fault. I was the only person to ever speak out against their actions while going through the process. I am likely to this day the only person who continues to speak out against hazing that went through their initiation process. I had two other peers drop out during the process, but they never speak of the incidents. I am hard-pressed to have a thorough conversation that addresses all of the issues I present here with either of them because they remain so afraid of the final threats we received when dropping the process that their silence is their refuge. It took me a full year before I did much more than acknowledge that I was hazed. It was after that period that I took action.

I was a nonpareil in my fraternity from the beginning. Having held myself to high standards in the sorority's hazing process, I remained vigilant when starting my next process. I

took a huge risk trusting another Greek organization with my talents and opinions, but I had my reasons to believe that this fraternity would be different. First, the entire initiation process except for rituals was open to the public and often discussed. Rather than dodge the difficult questions I sometimes posed, the active brothers were more than willing to address my concerns, and there were many. My Big Brother was not a reward after hours upon hours of pain and nearly passing out, but a gift and a relationship I cherish to this day. He was the person I trusted most, to whom I told my hazing story first, and who held my hand through a much less scary second chance. In my fraternity's process, which was devoid of hazing and consciously aware of the dangers of hazing, I found validation and strength. I was so comfortable in the membership process that I ran for chapter membership coordinator straight after my own process was over and then, when I freed myself of the chains of silence regarding my own past, District membership coordinator. Although I did not win office either time, this was the first time I won the confidence to speak out on a platform against hazing while running a public campaign.

My experience with hazing left an indelible mark on my soul. When I see the Greek letters of the organization that hurt me so much, I still cringe in fear. I may be a senior in college now, mature and wise in so many ways, but I know also that hazing occurs to older adults and can be inflicted upon others by anyone. I also respond in anger. I am angry that they caused pain in so many young female lives. I am angry that they can continue to do so because the legal system has not yet figured out a way to enforce the laws that have started to solidify. But most of all, I am sad and frustrated. The young women I see clutching at their Greek letters simply do not know better. To become part of a sisterhood, in their minds, means being hazed. I am so fortunate to have had a positive experience in my fraternity with which to compare the hazing I experienced. I know there is another way to establish the same strong bonds among people who

love one another and who share a cause. So this idea returns to the other two women in my pledge class who dropped the process. They cannot speak because they are afraid, they are angry, and rather than sad or frustrated, they are bitter. And so, there is a final reason why hazing needs to stop.

### **Hazer and Hazee**

From an organizational point of view, hazing is a detriment to all of a Greek organization's values, its reputation, and its viability in the long term. No Greek organization states in its mission statement that it wants degradation, humiliation, intimidation, and pain. Almost every Greek organization to my knowledge now possesses an anti-hazing statement and, more importantly, every college campus has a policy to that effect. Thus, it is a risk management issue when hazing occurs in an organization. At the national level, my fraternity allows each chapter the freedom to create its own education process for new members. It gives a guide and distributes ideas throughout the nation, but generally leaves the specifics up to the chapter. Due to this freedom, my own fraternity has had the misfortune of dealing with hazing activities. A single chapter violating national policy harms the entire fraternity when a law suit rears its head. Like a giant blocking out the sun, it consumes the fraternity and brings only darkness to the organization. In these law suits I find echoes of myself, of a college student who spoke up when wronged. I, like the national fraternity, do not defend the brothers who inflicted such pain on the student. The student is right and exceptionally brave to pursue legal action.

The blame shifts more heavily onto the shoulders of the national organization when they condone a specific method of pledge. The sorority who hazed me had a national policy—in practice—that condoned hazing. The process I went through was the same process every other chapter nationwide adopted. I even wrote to the national headquarters about these activities—

they even had standardized names—every week as Class President. They had knowledge of the pain and did nothing to stop it. It is one situation to be ignorant and unable to aid post-facto, but an entirely different situation to be aware and able to aid but choose not to.

My fraternity has survived nearly a century despite law suits of the hazing nature. This organization will likely be disbanded at the first law suit it faces.

### **Stop Hazing and Obstacles**

Hazing stems from a power imbalance, which was created in the Stanford prison experiment and inherent in the initiation of new members into an organization. Often, the premise is to “prove” one’s worth and the depth of one’s desire to the authorities in charge of initiation, who were, once, initiates themselves. We must stop hazing by eliminating first this mentality.

This mentality is present in too many aspects of our lives for it to disappear entirely. But one can minimize its presence in situations where hazing is likely to occur. In a Greek organization, the difference between degrading new members and elevating new members is huge. Greeks often do value their new members, but rather than show that aspect of their perspective to the new members, the actives push harder through hazing. It is a sick form of tough love. But, again, consider the psychological damage: the new members lack the knowledge of how much actives value them and become entrenched in negativity thrown in their direction. Over time, they believe only that which they are told. On the flip side, consider the psychological effect of cherishing new members: new members now feel valued, special, like they can make a significant contribution to the organization. They respect the older members because they are respected by them. They believe that the information they learn is worthwhile and seek to better themselves as already worthy people into future actives.



We live in a society where individualism is highly stressed. To force a collectivist mentality, hazing occurs. Being part of a group requires cooperation, understanding, and respect. Going through trials together is an effective way of bringing people on the same page. Perhaps it is not fair to compare my fraternity with the sorority that hazed me. One distinct difference is that I shared, with my band fraternity brothers, half a season of marching band prior to our establishment as a class. With the sorority, we began at strangers and became best friends quickly. How then does a group of strangers come together if not through hazing? This is a question that any group struggles to answer. There is no doubt in my mind that the primary reason people haze is to create cohesiveness among the new members so that they may develop a lifelong relationship with one another. I do not want to answer definitively how hazing can be replaced by another method that could create the same bonds, but I challenge others to think about whether those bonds are true or artificial. Maybe in the interest of forcing the creation of these bonds we ignore the inevitability of true friendship based solely on common values and beliefs.

Hazing is, ultimately, cyclical. Once it begins it is difficult to stop. The conditions in which hazing occurs creep up gradually on the unaware and seize at every opportunity to compromise the ethical standards we believe we have. Often, when asked about a hazing situation, a person will identify it as a problem and something in which he would never participate. But when suddenly caught in the middle how many people have the courage to speak up? None. In companies today corruption goes on for years before a whistleblower appears, a crime goes unpunished without witness protection programs, and one dissenting opinion is quashed by an overwhelming majority. Why, then, would a person be able to stick to his or her morals enough to take action? We value popularity, social networking, fun, and

accomplishment. We forget about God, moral codes, justice, and charity. Put yourself to the test and walk the talk. For once, it could save a life.

I find myself today a law school applicant because I know I can do better than my Big Sister did. Where she failed, I can succeed. There are countless college students who need someone courageous to represent them in court and I share their painful stories. I understand where they were. Hazing needs to end. It is a hidden danger nestled in the safe haven of higher education that threatens the brightest, the liveliest, and the most ethical in the next generation. The cycle must end; without a promising future society ceases to progress.