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Lawsuit Shatters Code of Silence Over Hazing at Black Fraternities

By PETER APPLEBOME,

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, 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 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.

Alpha Phi Alpha had also stopped admitting new members, but it lifted the suspension after adopting strict anti-hazing guidelines.

In the incident at Southeast Missouri State, Michael Davis, a journalism student, was beaten, kicked and body-slammed to death during a Kappa Alpha Psi initiation ritual last May.

About the same time, Christopher Allen Powell, a Kappa Alpha Psi pledge at the University of Georgia, was hospitalized with infected buttocks after being repeatedly paddled during hazing.

Steven Otey Jr., a student at Southern College of Technology in Marietta, Ga., was hospitalized two months earlier after fraternity brothers at Kappa Alpha Psi stood on his abdomen and beat him repeatedly during a three-hour hazing session.

Kevin Nash, a student at Indiana University, was hospitalized earlier this year after being struck more than 100 times in a hazing session at another black fraternity, Omega Psi Phi.

At Paine College in Augusta, Ga., Gary Ross was partly paralyzed after being hit on the head while pledging Omega Psi Phi this year.

And at Southern University in Baton Rouge, La., in 1992, Derone Walker was blinded after being hit on the head with a frying pan while pledging Phi Beta Sigma, still another black fraternity.

In June, 23 members of the Omega Psi Phi chapter at the University of Maryland agreed to a plea bargain after being charged with beating pledges in 1993 in hazing incidents that left six pledges with serious injuries, including a ruptured spleen and a broken ankle.

Mr. Pride, a slim, intense business major from Nashville who grew up in Anderson, Ind., said his first encounter with Kappa Alpha Psi came when he was a high school student attending leadership training sessions at Indiana University.

One day he walked by the Kappa Alpha Psi house on the Bloomington campus and noticed the symbol out front, a K inside a diamond. It was the same as the tattoo on his father's arm. His father pledged in the 1960's. Mr. Pride said he was entranced.

"I had never seen that many young black men dressed so professionally, in such a nice home," he said. "That was the first large group of black men that I could say I saw at a young age that looked like they were on the same level as everybody else."

Indeed, Mr. Pride later learned that black fraternities, with 1.5 million active members and alumni, had enormous influence on many campuses and provided a lifelong network.

Alumni chapters of black fraternities are known to be far larger and more active than their white counterparts. Many take part in mentoring and charitable and community programs. Kappa Alpha Psi alone, with about 100,000 members, including students and alumni, raises \$500,000 to \$1 million annually for scholarships and charities.

Mr. Pride said that, as provincial coordinator for his fraternity, he found that hazing seemed to be everywhere, "like an unwritten book."

"One of the things that brothers do is, we sit around and tell pledge stories," he said. "It's almost a comparison of who got beat the worst, as if it's some type of honor how badly you were beaten."

Hank Nuwer, author of "Broken Pledging" (Longstreet Press, 1990), said that variations of violent hazing have included a ritual formerly used at North Carolina A&T State University called "holocaust" in which a fraternity brother leaps from a dresser onto the chests of pledges lying on the floor below. In another variation, called "slamming," pledges are held upside down and dropped on their head.

When his group of pledges were admitted to the fraternity, Mr. Pride said, they got their red-hooded sweatshirts, jeans and white shoes. But there was one last ritual: each pledge was burned on both upper arms and over the heart with a branding iron.

"Burnt like animals, -- three times, pussing, bleeding, burning, smelling like burnt flesh," Mr. Pride recalled. "It burns all night long, all day to the next day; it's all you feel."

Fraternity members say branding is more common as a voluntary procedure after members have joined than as a part of the initiation.

Dr. Williams of Tennessee State, who said his back was hurt when he was pushed from a second-story window in a hazing incident at Southern University, said the history of blacks in the United States and the degree to which their very survival has often depended on physical strength helps explain why the ability to withstand physical abuse has become part of the initiation for joining prestigious groups like fraternities.

Hazing, he added, is a perversion of the goals of black fraternities. But the abuse differs only in kind from that meted out at white fraternities, where alcohol abuse continues to kill or cripple its victims as well.

Indeed, Dr. Williams added, white pledges' seclusion in fraternity houses, the presence of powerful alumni and often lenient treatment from officials can provide protection for whites who break the rules in a way that is not available to blacks.

"The perception is that black Greeks party and dance and kick butt, and that whites get drunk and act goofy, but it's good clean fun," he said. "A white kid may get drunk, be locked up naked in a trunk and left in a graveyard, but if he makes it to a Kansas farmhouse, someone will get him some jeans and take care of him. You take eight black guys in the same situation, and all hell breaks loose."

Mr. Harris, of Kappa Alpha Psi, said it would be tragic if the controversy over hazing overshadowed the enormous contributions of black fraternities. And he argued that people like Mr. Pride who had taken part in abusive pledging and did not report it to the authorities were to blame for its persistence.

Dr. Williams, on the other hand, said Mr. Pride and the other plaintiffs should be applauded for having the courage to break the code of silence.

Mr. Pride said he knew that to many people he was the ultimate sell-out: a black man who went to a white lawyer to take on one of the most successful institutions in black America. But he said he was convinced he had done the right thing.

"I believe that my fraternity is strong enough and smart enough to get rid of this beast called hazing and pledging, and continue to live," he said. "If I'm wrong, then my fraternity will be defunct when this is over with. And I will be sad. I will be hurt and will be hated."

"But I will live with myself, knowing that I did the right thing."