MSU sorority closed over drinking, hazing
University, ousted women differ on gravity of allegations.

By Steve Koehler

A Missouri State University sorority was disbanded for playing drinking games, leaving blindfolded women in a cemetery, and forcing a woman to get an application from a strip club.

The national council for Sigma Sigma Sigma yanked its charter, shuttering the local chapter for four years and leaving about 50 members to find a new place to live. It is reportedly the first MSU sorority forced to close.

Complaints about the chapter surfaced in mid-November after someone reported seeing a woman wearing the sorority's name being led blindfolded into a house. The investigation that followed focused on allegations of hazing, drinking and student conduct violations.

The sorority, which had been on campus since 1945, had about 140 members including the 54 who lived in three-story brick house on East Elm Street. The decision to revoke the charter means that new members will lose the $800 each paid in fees and can't pledge with another sorority.

Jamie Francis, a sophomore member of the sorority, said MSU and the chapter's national governing board "ruined us" over minor incidents.

"We didn't think at all that we'd be kicked off for anything so petty," said Francis, of St. Charles. "We didn't feel what we had done was that big a deal. What happened (to us) we didn't deserve."

University officials disagree.

Dixie Williams, assistant director of student activities for fraternity and sorority life at MSU, said the incidents were severe.

"I don't believe at all that these are minor things," she said. "Blindfolding women and leaving them in a cemetery is hazing."

Other allegations ranged from taking blindfolded women to a cave and to the basement of a house where they were interrogated. Pledges who refused the hazing were verbally abused, Williams said.

"The possibility of injury both mentally and physically is present," she said.
Kelsy Bartlett, a sophomore member of the sorority, pointed out that about 50 of the 60 prospective members involved in the incidents stayed with the sorority after the initiations. That fact, she said, shows that what took place wasn't that bad.

"It wasn't like they had to jump off a cliff," she said. "It was all in good fun."

Bartlett said the group's national governing board and MSU acted too harshly over "little things."

"What we did they considered hazing but we didn't. It wasn't considered that. We didn't believe it was hazing," Bartlett said. "No one complained."

Drinking

In one incident, the sorority reportedly held an unregistered event - or "walk-off" - with over 40 members traveling to a rural site. At that event, alcohol was consumed and drinking games were played, which is against conduct rules.

Bartlett said drinking by members - which she said included some minors - was done off-campus at an informal party.

"A bunch of us were hanging out," Bartlett said. "It was not in the house. In our eyes, we tried to keep everything as clean as possible. We don't drink in the house or do anything in the house. All Greeks drink when underage. We never did it irresponsibly."

Francis said that underage drinking is common.

"Anyone knows college and high school kids drink," she said. "The (Greek) rules don't go with the times there are now. They're outdated."

Mike Jungers, associate dean of students, said rules regulating fraternity and sorority activities apply whether events are inside the house or off campus. He said alcohol is banned from new-member events.

A check of Springfield police records shows seven criminal reports from the house since October 2006, including three for liquor violations.

Investigation

The initial report of a blindfolded woman wearing the Sigma Sigma Sigma clothing being led into a house triggered the two-month investigation.

University officials contacted the sorority leaders about the report and were told that the members involved had been disciplined.
However, Jungers said, the university quickly learned of other incidents involving the sorority. "Information started tumbling into the university and what we were hearing was serious," he said.

MSU officials contacted the national headquarters of the sorority with their concerns. The national group, based in Virginia, owns the building on MSU's campus and sent officials to investigate.

Last week, the national office revoked the charter for the local sorority. The chapter appealed the decision to revoke the charter but was unsuccessful.

"The decision to close the chapter for failure to comply with national policies was made by the executive council of Sigma Sigma Sigma," according to a news release. "The closing of the chapter is not an easy decision. We value the contributions ... members have made over the years and when conditions are appropriate for our return, Sigma Sigma Sigma will actively seek the opportunity to become a productive and viable chapter at Missouri State University."

National leaders would not comment to the News-Leader about the incident.

Bill Hansen, whose daughter Dana Hansen was in the sorority, said he talked to MSU officials and national board members during their campus visit last week.

He expressed concern about how students were questioned.

"It seemed like they decided the girls were bad and evil and wanted to get them," said Hansen of Overland Park, Kan. "I said, 'Look, here's the deal. Even an accused murderer gets representation. Give them their day in court.'"

Hansen said the rules regulating sororities may be too intrusive. He pointed out that members are in trouble for having a party at a beach house with both members and non-members.

"Where do you draw the line and stop regulating the girls' lives away from the sorority?" he asked.

Suspension

Shortly after the investigation got underway, MSU informed the sorority that it was suspended as a student organization. That meant it could not engage in any social or recreational activities or recruit any new members.

At MSU, fraternity and sorority life is governed by a board made up of representatives from various Greek-letter organizations.

The decisions issued by the board are generally accepted by the university. The board could have yanked the sorority's charter if the national council had not taken action.
Jungers said in this case, the investigation began as the semester was ending and the board was in transition. The sorority issue was expected to come up this spring before a new board.

A week ago, the national Sigma Sigma Sigma office informed members that the house was closing and they would have to find new living quarters.

That was about the same time that MSU sent a letter to members' parents, warning them that the sorority was under investigation and could be closed down.

Bartlett said MSU didn't have the right to contact parents without the students' permission because of federal student privacy laws. "Parents had nothing to do with this. They shouldn't have gotten a letter," she said.

But Jungers said the letter was informing parents about the status of the organization, not their student, so it was allowed.

"We felt it important to notify parents of the allegations. If the sorority was suspended or the charter taken, there could be housing issues," he said. "We wanted to involve parents with accurate information."

Bartlett has moved into an apartment across the street. She started looking in December when it looked like the sorority might shut down.

"I'm really disappointed and feel bad for the new girls," Bartlett said.

As for herself, Bartlett said she's glad she had a chance to experience a sorority.

"I still think Greek life is a good thing. I made good friends. I met my best friend. We're still all going to stay in touch. I think what happened still hasn't set in yet."

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