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Parents hopeful law will prevent deaths

By Enrique Rangel | A-J AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN - Mark and Freada Warren will never forget what happened that morning of Sept. 14, 2002.

The couple's son, Clay Warren, a freshman at Texas Tech, and two school friends were returning from a fraternity function in Amarillo when a parent's worst nightmare happened. The trio had an automobile accident that left the Plainview student in a comma. He died a week later. The car's driver and the other student survived.

"This accident could have been prevented," the senior Warren said Thursday. The driver had stayed up pretty late the night before and was sleep deprived.

Moreover, if the fraternity his son belonged to had some guidelines on trips and other activities, Clay would not have died, Warren emphasized.

However, for the Warrens there is some consolation that their son's death may prevent similar tragedies.

Gov. Rick Perry signed into law House Bill 2639, which will require fraternities, sororities, faculty advisers and other college or university officials involved in student activities to attend an annual risk management course at the start of each academic year.

The goal, said the bill's main author, Rep. John Smithee, R-Amarillo, is to make sure that everyone on campus knows there are some guidelines to follow before planning fraternity activities such as parties and trips, and - just as important - to discourage hazing, boozing and other illegal activities. The bill's co-author was Rep. Joe Heflin, D-Crosbyton, in whose district the Warrens live.

"I'm glad the governor signed it," Smithee said. "It's going to prevent some tragedies like the one the one that took the young man's life."

In addition, before writing their policies, the insurance companies will require these organizations to have strict rules and policies in place because they are not going to issue a policy if they think they'd have to pay on it, Smithee explained.

Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, who had introduced an identical bill but merged it with the Smithee/Heflin bill after the latter got unanimous support in the House, is just as glad Perry signed the legislation.

"Let me be clear on this," Duncan said. "I was a member of a fraternity and it was a life-changing experience. But when alcohol and hazing start becoming a priority, that's when we run into problems."

Elizabeth Messangale, associate director of the Center for Campus Life at Texas Tech, could not be reached for comment, but said in a recent interview that although Tech students are well behaved and the school has not had a tragedy since Warren died, the administration welcomes the bill.

Mason Moses, president of the Student Government Association at Tech, said he and other students he has talked to welcome it just as much.

"It's good that we'll have to educate ourselves as to what we can and can't do," said Moses, who is also a fraternity member. "We want to have fun, but we also want to act responsibly."

The Warrens are happy that the governor signed the bill because, since their son died, they have learned that hazing and other illegal activities still persist on many campuses, Mark Warren said.

The University of Texas at Austin, for example, has had two hazing deaths in the past two years, and the tragedies have led to the indictment of several leaders from two fraternities and to a five-year suspension of one of the fraternities.

In addition, in a special report last year, USA Today found out that for college students, the first year is the riskiest. The newspaper analyzed 620 student deaths and found that freshmen account for more than a third of all undergraduate deaths, mainly because of hazing or alcohol or drug abuse.

"We don't want to ruin the (students') social atmosphere" Warren said. "But this is something we saw as a real need."

The Warrens were the main advocates for HB 2639 and their heartfelt testimony convinced the House Higher Education Committee to unanimously recommend the bill to the entire House membership, panel members said.

"We refer to it as Clay's bill," Warren said.

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For an analysis of the bill go to:

<http://www.legis.state.tx.us/tlodocs/80R/analysis/html/HB02639E.HTM>