'Culture of denial' in fraternity hazings

EKU CASE LATEST IN HISTORY OF BLACK GREEK ORGANIZATIONS

By Ashlee Clark

An Eastern Kentucky University student who was allegedly the victim of hazing could be just one of many young people who endure violent and humiliating behavior to join a black Greek organization, experts say.

EKU student Brent Whiteside was hospitalized this month after allegedly being hazed while he pledged Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, a historically black organization. EKU and the national Kappa Alpha Psi organization have suspended the chapter pending an investigation.

University officials call it an isolated incident. But hazing allegations such as this one only chip away at a problem that has festered throughout the black Greek community nationwide, experts say.

Fraternities and sororities of all types have hazed incoming members, or pledges, for decades. But the practice has become dangerous and sometimes deadly since hazing was officially banned from black Greek organizations in 1990. That is when the practice went "underground," meaning it was performed secretly and without being regulated.

"There is this culture of secrecy, culture of denial," said Ricky L. Jones, a professor at the University of Louisville and author of Black Haze: Violence and Manhood in Black Greek-letter Fraternities.

Experts say it will be a formidable task to end hazing in fraternities and sororities. Organizations would need to confront and change a mind-set ingrained in the black Greek culture that condones hazing.

"It's a deadly cycle, and it's a cycle that unfortunately goes so deep and so far that a lot of our members are not even aware of the illogical arguments that they make in terms of hazing," said Lawrence Ross Jr., author of The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities and member of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity.

"No one wants to say that their experience really didn't have any worth," he said. "They have to hang on to a piece of it."

Few details given

EKU officials and those involved in the investigation have been tight-lipped about what happened. Whiteside and his family could not be reached for comment. The national organization also did not return repeated phone calls seeking comment. EKU has not revealed
details of the alleged hazing, including the extent of Whiteside's injuries, because the investigation is ongoing.

The case was reported March 8. Whiteside spent several days at Central Baptist Hospital in Lexington.

An EKU police officer investigating what happened contacted Whiteside on March 11. The student told the investigator that he "wanted to focus on his health issues at this time and stated that he would contact this investigator when he was fully recovered," according to the call response run report.

No criminal charges have been filed against the Kappas, said Marc Whitt, associate vice president for public relations and marketing at EKU.

Wardell Johnson, the campus adviser for the Kappas, said Whiteside is out of the hospital. He declined to comment further.

Mike Reagle, the associate vice president for student affairs at EKU, stressed that this is an isolated event.

"The one thing that I always want to say is this is an isolated circumstance for us," Reagle said. "Sometimes it gets blown out to the entire Greek population."

Long history of hazing

Experts say hazing can include a wide range of activities, from running errands and performing calisthenics to paddling and severe beatings.

The practice became prevalent at colleges and universities in the United States in the mid-1800s. Upperclassmen would ridicule freshmen and sophomores so the younger students could prove they were worthy of being in college, said Walter Kimbrough, author of Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities.

The hazing of underclassmen began to be outlawed around the 1920s. But the practice then trickled into fraternities and sororities, Kimbrough said.

Around this time, black fraternities and sororities began to adopt a pledge process. The initial purpose of the process was to create a uniform way to disseminate information about the organization to chapters across the country, Ross said. The Kappas were the first group to organize a pledge club in 1919, Ross said.

Ironically, the founders of black fraternities and sororities didn't have to go through a pledging or hazing process, Ross said. The members were initially picked based on their previous actions on campus and high academic standards.
Over the next few years, pledging continued within black Greek organizations. Hazing also began to play a role in the pledge process, experts say.

The death of one student who was pledging Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity led the National Pan-Hellenic Council, which oversees the nine historically black fraternities and sororities, to ban hazing in 1990 and establish a membership intake program.

Difficult to stop

But the proclamation didn't stop the hazing.

Two women pledging Alpha Kappa Alpha drowned during a hazing ritual in 2002. A student pledging Kappa Alpha Psi at Florida A&M University was beaten with canes in 2006, and two fraternity brothers were sent to jail.

Ross said black Greeks believe there is an intangible quality that comes out of pledging that transforms those seeking membership into valuable members of the organization. However, there's no quantifiable way to measure that, he said.

Hank Nuwer, a hazing expert who has studied the topic for 30 years, said the pledge process and hazing is comparable to the military in terms of forging a bond between members. However, hazing becomes dangerous because students tend to think they are "superhuman" and not at risk of getting hurt during the process, Nuwer said.

Pledges are also less inclined to quit the hazing process to avoid the stigma of not being able to withstand the rituals.

The cycle continues when new members complete the pledge process; they will haze the next group of new members because they were hazed themselves.

"I hate that this is going on," said Jones, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi. "It breaks my heart."

Short of completely disbanding the organizations, experts have made various suggestions to confront the problem. These include establishing a moratorium so experts can figure out how to stop hazing, enforcing penalties, and reducing the number of chapters.

All agree that a change of mind-set would be required to prevent such cases from overshadowing the good things these groups accomplish, such as volunteer work and mentorship in the black community.

"When the details come out, it casts a cloud over these groups, and that's not what they're all about," Nuwer said.

News researcher Linda Niemi contributed to this story. Ashlee Clark covers Madison County for the Herald-LeADER.