THE WRONGS OF THE RITES OF BROTHERHOOD

By David Mills
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The scar on his buttocks is a permanent reminder of how important it was to him, just four years ago, to get into a fraternity. He endured almost seven weeks of rigorous hazing -- paddling, face-slapping, body-punching and worse -- and he became a respected brother for it.

What he now regrets, he says, more than the blows he took, is the punishment he laid on the next batch of pledges. When his turn came to carry on the chap- ter's secret tradition of hazing, he did it with gusto.

"I've never been a violent person," says this 23-year-old graduate of a mid-sized Southern university. "I'm still not a violent person." Yet as a "big brother" he would slap pledges hard across the face, sometimes for no reason, fully confident that none of them would dare lift a hand against him.

And he would feel no remorse. "That is what scared me the most," he says. "It's just amazing what you can do to other people."

The four national Greek-letter fraternities for African Americans -- Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi and Phi Beta Sigma -- can claim many illustrious members, among them Thurgood Marshall, Jesse Jackson, L. Douglas Wilder, Tom Bradley, David Dinkins and Walter Fauntroy. Alumni chapters pride themselves on their volunteerism, and on being a network for black professionals.

But on college campuses, black fraternities have a reputation for distinctively violent hazing. So violent, in fact, that the leaders of those four fraternities, and of the four national black sororities, have made a stunning decision: They want to abolish "pledging," the traditional period of indoctrination and testing before a student becomes a full-fledged brother or sister. They want to develop a whole new way of bringing in members -- one that doesn't involve physical or psychological pressure.

And they say the very survival of the fraternities and sororities depends on it.

"People are being killed. People are being maimed. Lawsuits are being levied against the organizations," says Carter D. Womack, national president of Phi Beta Sigma. "Unless we take

some serious action to eliminate hazing, we could all be out of business, plain and simple, because of somebody acting a fool."

Traditionalists, of whom there are many in the fraternity system, are outraged by plans to do away with pledging. "A lot of the undergraduate chapters are trying to mobilize undergraduates to oppose this," says Marlow Martin, a University of Maryland senior and head of the campus Panhellenic Council, which represents the eight black Greek organizations.

Martin says he was paddled, slapped and kicked when he joined the Omegas in 1986. But "I would definitely do it again," he says. "Nothing happens that you do not consent to." One reason he chose Omega Psi Phi in the first place, he says, was "I heard it was the hardest one to pledge."

"The pledge process brought a lot out of me," Martin says. "It pushes you to your physical and mental limits. It makes you depend on other people and support each other." He believes that a "physically and mentally challenging" indoctrination is crucial to building a strong brotherhood. "The way they're talking about changing, we might as well be the NAACP -- sign your name, you're a member. What's the difference? What's the bond that makes us separate?"

Moses Norman, the Omegas' national president, says, "The youngsters -- and some oldsters too -- are dealing more with mythology than truth. We are not the Marine Corps. We're not the Green Berets. We're organizations made up of scholarly men and women. ... It has gotten completely out of hand."

In Omega Psi Phi alone, during the 1980s, a Tennessee State University student died of alcohol poisoning after a forced drinking binge on initiation night -- his body was also bruised; a pledge at Lamar University in Texas died while running laps as part of a hazing ritual; a University of Pittsburgh student suffered a ruptured eardrum while being beaten by fraternity members; a pledge at North Carolina A&T was scarred when someone set fire to his beard; and a pledge at Norfolk State University had his jaw broken in two places.

For Kappa Alpha Psi and Phi Beta Sigma, the decision has already been made by their executive boards: No more pledge period, as of the coming fall semester. "There is nothing in Kappa Alpha Psi worth a young man losing his dignity," says the Kappas' national president, Ulysses McBride. "There is nothing worth his losing a limb."

But two fraternities -- Omega Psi Phi and Alpha Phi Alpha -- will confront this extremely emotional issue during their national "conclaves" this summer. Their members could choose to ignore the leadership and vote to maintain pledging. One anti-hazing advocate puts the odds at 50-50. "I'm scared to death," he says. "Tradition is very, very powerful."

A Tragedy at Morehouse in December 1988, after his first semester at Morehouse College, Joel A. Harris returned to his home in the Bronx and said, "Mom, I'm going to be an Alpha man."

Morehouse required that students wait until their sophomore year before joining a fraternity. But already, Joel had learned some Alpha Phi Alpha history and some "steps" -- precision dance

moves that are part of perhaps the showiest element of black Greek life, the competitive "step show."

By last summer, he was certain -- Joel told his mother he would be pledging in the fall. She suggested that he wait.

"I said to him, 'I think your {grade point average} is more important,' " recalls Adrienne Harris, "because I know pledging takes a lot of time from studies, even though it's not supposed to. 'You're doing so well. I don't want to see that drop.'

"He said, 'Mom, I can handle both.' "

Joel Harris was preparing for a career in business law. He was attracted to Alpha Phi Alpha, the oldest of the black fraternities, because of the political and social leaders who have been "Alpha men" -- Martin Luther King Jr., Atlanta mayors Andrew Young and Maynard Jackson, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry. Belonging to this brotherhood "is something he thought was very, very important," Harris says, especially "at a premier black college."

Before Joel returned to school, his mother told him, "Just be careful." She suspected there would be some sort of "pranks" involved in pledging. He said, "Mom, I know when too much is too much."

"They all know there will be some of that," Harris says, "because these are the tales and fish stories men talk about."

Around 3 a.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 18, Adrienne Harris was awakened by her telephone. It was the dean of student affairs at Morehouse College, calling to inform her that her 18-year-old son -- her only child -- was dead.

Joel had collapsed two hours earlier in an apartment outside of Atlanta. He was one of 19 Morehouse students in the room who wanted to pledge Alpha Phi Alpha. They were being overseen by fraternity members, though the school-sanctioned pledging period hadn't yet begun.

To this day, Harris doesn't know exactly what happened to her son at that secret gathering. His death was attributed to an irregular heart rhythm, the result of a congenital defect. (He had undergone corrective heart surgery at age 2, but that didn't seem to interfere with his physical development. "Joel has been very athletic all of his life," Harris says. "Little League, gymnastics, karate.")

Investigators from the Cobb County medical examiner's office found that Joel Harris and the other aspiring pledges were being hazed. Hours before he died, Joel had been punched in the chest and slapped in the face as part of a ritual eyewitnesses called "thunder and lightning." It's unclear whether he was being hit when he collapsed.

The medical examiner's report didn't declare the hazing to be a "direct cause" of Joel's death, but it stated that he was "under an intensive amount of anxiety and stress" that night.

Eight Alphas have been charged with hazing, a misdemeanor in Georgia since 1988. Each of them faces a maximum fine of $500. (After this highly publicized case, the Georgia legislature reclassified hazing as a "high and aggravated" misdemeanor, punishable by 12 months in prison or a $5,000 fine.)

"We were trying to revive Joel for 10 minutes. It seemed like 10 hours," said one fraternity member, Randy Richardson, during a press conference last November. "There are no words that you can use to explain the feelings that you go through when someone passes in your arms. ... That's a tragic experience I will have to endure forever."

The most painful irony, for Adrienne Harris, is that black fraternities were founded on noble principles. "If they told me my son had a heart attack giving food to the homeless, I could live with that," she says. "Or had a heart attack tutoring a young kid, I could live with that. Or had a heart attack in the library studying the history of the Alphas, I could live with that.

"But horsing around I can't live with."

'It's Almost Mystical' At least 50 college students, nine of them black, have died in the last 15 years because of fraternity or sorority hazing, according to anti-hazing activist Eileen Stevens of Sayville, N.Y. Her count is based on news reports and personal contact with the families of victims.

Her own son, Chuck, died of alcohol poisoning and exposure in 1979 while pledging a local fraternity at Alfred University in New York. On a freezing February night, he was thrown into the trunk of a car with two other pledges. They were ordered to drink a bottle of whiskey and a mixture of beer and wine while fraternity members drove them around.

In the years since, Stevens, who is white, has lobbied for anti-hazing legislation and has spoken at hundreds of colleges and universities. More than 30 states have passed anti-hazing laws in the last decade.

Hazing injuries in white fraternities, Stevens says, usually result from heavy drinking -- "coercive chugging," in her words -- or "hours of rigorous exercise, combined often with sleep deprivation."

There are exceptions. "I have seen color photographs of bloodied, bruised, blistered behinds of young {white} men on a Texas campus who have been subjected to that physical brutality for decades," Stevens says. And a University of Illinois student, while pledging a predominantly Jewish fraternity last year, was thrown to the floor, punched and slammed against a wall. He suffered a concussion.

But observers of white and black fraternities, including black Greeks themselves, say that slapping pledges around is much more common among blacks. And nobody knows why.

"I've come to think it has to do, number one, with a macho attitude," says Charles Wright, an administrator at Baltimore's Coppin State College and a past national president of Phi Beta

Sigma. "It's almost mystical, the kind of energy that goes into fraternity life during the pledge period."

For years, Wright has spoken out against hazing, and he welcomes the demise of pledging. But until recently, he says, the black Greek leadership has avoided the issue. (The national organizations have long prohibited hazing, and have suspended or fined chapters that got caught at it, and even expelled members. But black fraternity leaders concede there has been a need for "better monitoring" of undergraduate pledging.)

"There are alumni brothers who are worse than any undergraduates I've ever seen in wanting to hold onto that tradition," Wright says. "I've given speeches where people walked out on me." In the early '80s, Wright invited Stevens to the Sigmas' national convention, the first and only time Stevens has addressed black Greeks.

"My outrage over the pledge process has evolved because of what I've seen happening over the last two decades to African American men in our society," Wright says. "There is enough abuse in general. For us to be abusive to one another, in order for someone to become a member of a fraternity, is absurd.

"I come across bright, committed, community-conscious young men across this country who choose not to join a fraternity because they are not going to allow themselves to be subjected to the indignities and the nonsense we subject them to," he says. "And that's the system's loss. And it's the community's loss."

Among the sororities -- Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta and Sigma Gamma Rho -- hazing isn't nearly as violent. But Janet Ballard, national president of AKA, has heard of sisters slapping pledges, or requiring them to "take a certain position -- bending over, for instance -- and remain in that position for hours at a time."

The members of AKA, at their national convention next month, will vote on whether to abolish pledging. As in the fraternities, Ballard says, there are sisters who argue, "This is tradition. We don't want to change."

One Brother's Tale "It gets to the thing of whether you're a punk or not. Can you hang or can't you? I realized the process itself was kind of stupid. But at the same time, everybody else went through the same thing. That kind of makes you accept it. 'I went through hell, and so will you.' It's like a rite of passage, basically."

That's how one man -- the one with the three-inch scar on his buttocks -- sums up the pledging process as he experienced it in 1986.

Few things are so shrouded in secrecy as fraternity rituals. But now that pledging may be a thing of the past in black fraternities, this man agreed to talk in detail about his six weeks and five days "on line" before becoming a full-fledged brother. "I just think that it should be known," he says. "I've hazed people and I've been hazed, and I can see it from both sides. And I regret it."

Although he has graduated and is no longer involved in the fraternity, he remains close with some of the brothers, who would be angry, he says, if they knew he was telling this story. He asked that his name not be printed, and that his school -- a predominantly white Southern university -- and his fraternity not be identified. "All of them are doing the same things," he says.

He had several reasons for wanting to join a fraternity. While a freshman, he had come to know some of the brothers in this particular chapter. He agreed with the organization's achievement-oriented principles. And he wanted to be active on campus. "I didn't just want to be somebody who went to school."

The pledge period is a time to study the fraternity's past, to honor its founders, to learn all the secret lore. But he knew before he went on line that there would also be hazing, and that it would get "physical." The big brothers "pretty much tell you. They tell you that you're going to get beat up. 'Be prepared. If you don't want to get beat up, leave now.' They tell you that. You just don't know to what degree." (The intensity of hazing varies from fraternity to fraternity, from chapter to chapter within a fraternity, and even from year to year within a chapter.)

Four other "line brothers" pledged with him. However, if a big brother was to ask, "How many of you are there?" the proper response would be: "We are one with five working parts, sir!"

The pledges dressed alike at all times, whether in army fatigues, casual wear or dark suits for special occasions. Outside of class, they weren't allowed to talk to anyone but each other and the big brothers. And everywhere they went, they marched in line. In black fraternities, these are fundamental, time-honored -- and rather public -- ways of establishing solidarity among the line brothers.

The pledges also were required to memorize a special greeting for each big brother, a greeting as simple or as ornate as that brother wanted it, and to recite it whenever they encountered him. (Even today, this young man can effortlessly rattle off the 35-word greeting demanded by the chapter president in 1986.) To mess up a big brother's greeting would be to invite harsh discipline, behind closed doors.

Paddling was the preferred method. "That's a chapter phenomenon," he says. "We were known for paddling. Other chapters are known for punching you. Some chapters are known for other types of abuse."

The wood was swung every day, he says. "Nighttime, daytime, anytime. Mainly at night, mainly on weekends." Sometimes it wasn't severe. "Three whacks ain't that bad after about 10 of them. After you get your first 10 in life, you can take three good ones."

But the accumulation of strokes took a toll. "It gets to a point where you can't sleep on your back anymore because your butt actually swells, and your butt gets surprisingly hard. It gets swollen and black. Myself, I was the line president, I was the honcho of the line, and this other guy was like a goof on our line -- he was always fumbling and messing up. So we tended to get the most wood. I got the most wood mainly because I was accountable for everybody."

One morning, during the fifth week of pledging, he noticed drops of blood in his underwear. "I pulled 'em back up. I thought this was something that was supposed to happen. I had no idea. There wasn't any pain because it was so numb." When one big brother, already a friend of his, noticed him "walking crazy" and discovered the blood, the paddling of this group of pledges was halted.

But there were other painful rituals, including "hotbacking," also known as "the electric chair." A pledge would crouch in the middle of a room, as if sitting on a chair. His shirt would be off, his torso and back wetted. "One brother would start from one end of the room, the other would start from the other end of the room, and they'd run together and -- wham! -- smack you with their hands, on the back and the front at the same time.

"The wetness made it hurt all the more," he says. "No scars, though. It was a very effective method of hazing. I probably got hot backed about 15 times on line. It was at their whim, whenever they felt like you deserved it."

Food hazing, which isn't unique to black fraternities, was frequent. These pledges had to drink hot sauce, eat bouillon cubes and pass a raw egg among themselves from mouth to mouth.

The most intense hazing sessions came on Friday and Saturday nights, he says. "You got nonstop paddling, smacking, punching, beating, eating. One time I asked for some water, and they made me drink a whole gallon of water until I threw up," he says, laughing. " 'Oh, so you want some water? You made a mistake asking for water. Keep drinking, keep drinking.'

"Some brothers had their own house, so it was pretty isolated and they could do these kind of things and not really create any disturbance."

All this time, the pledges were getting three or four hours of sleep a night, attending all their classes and doing weekly volunteer work at an area boys' club.

Thoughts of quitting did cross this pledge's mind. "But pride gets you. You get to the point where, 'I did not take this beating for nothing.' You see what I mean? 'If I do quit, I just took a whipping for nothing.' So after the first pledge session, we really had the attitude of, 'We're going to take whatever they can dish out, and we're going to make it and show these rascals.'

"We had common sense and knew that they were not out to kill us," he says. "So after the first pledge session, we went upstairs and we cried and we gave each other high fives."

Not every fraternity member was a violent hazer. "There were plenty of big brothers who hated it. You would always hope that certain brothers were around, because they wouldn't allow it to happen."

But once the hazing gets going, "it gets crazy," he says. "It's like a spirit almost, because it overtakes people. It's not like it was always premeditated. Everything could be calm in a room. The pledges would be reciting history, all the brothers would be sitting. But as soon as one

person smacks somebody, then all hell breaks loose. Another person smacks somebody, then the paddles come out, then the food comes out.

"Some people enjoyed {doing} that stuff, because they couldn't stop," he says.

Among black fraternities, there's also a tradition of brothers from neighboring schools visiting a pledge line and getting their licks in. In this man's case, members from nine other chapters paid a visit to him and his line brothers.

As he remembers it, the hazing lightened up after about four weeks on line. The big brothers "got to the point where they got tired of beating on us because they kind of started liking us. Friendships start forming. They're talking to you and you're doing things for 'em, and you can't help but liking somebody."

Traditionally, at the end of the pledge period comes "hell week," when the status of a pledge changes. Among the Alphas, for instance, a pledge is a "sphinxman" until hell week, when he becomes an "ape." Among the Kappas, a "scroller" turns into a "barbarian." That new status confers the right to fight back if a big brother gets in your face.

Throughout hell week, says this young man, the line brothers didn't know exactly when they would "go over" and become full members. But they got a clue on "turnback night."

"Their goal is to turn you back. Their whole goal is to make you drop because you're so close to crossing. So we knew that night that it was going to be over very, very soon, because it was an unusual whipping that we got, like never before, and it was a whipping where every brother in the chapter was there, and there were no foreign brothers." That night, outdoors, he was wrestled to the ground and hit across his bare back with a switch. He was formally initiated into the fraternity the next night.

Membership had its privileges. The following semester, "the women were all over me, man. Couldn't shake 'em off," he says. "It was like being a movie star."

Strangely, as he recalls the beatings, he and his line brothers endured, he declares, "I cherish a lot of those memories, because I've never been to a point of physical brokenness like that ever in my life. And I know those other guys never have either. We sat around a table and cried together, and put bandages on each other. Going through hell does create unity. It's a stupid means of doing it, but it does.

"I've experienced something a lot of people haven't. And I know I can take a whipping."

Although he now opposes hazing, he confesses that he turned out to be a moderate to heavy hazer himself.

"This one guy, he could've beat me up. The guy was like 6-3, and I would really whale on him. I would smack him and kick him and do all kinds of crazy stuff. Sometimes I'd do it for no reason. Sometimes I'd just go up to him and smack him in his face. I would just do it. Some people just

did it to me, and that was the justification -- 'Well, I got smacked in the face for no reason, just 'cause somebody had a bad day.' " He chuckles. "I'd just go up to him and say, 'You know, you're ugly today.' Whap!"

Then and Now Perhaps the Sigmas' president, Carter D. Womack, describes the problem best. "Undergraduates find themselves in a position of, 'I'm in control. I have you under my thumb. You do what the hell I want you to do.' And the majority of them don't know how to deal with that power," he says. "You've got somebody who wants to join the organization bad enough, he would jump out of a window if you said 'jump.' "

"I am amazed that there haven't been more deaths and injuries," says Charles Wright of Coppin State College. "We have been blessed and lucky."

Because hazing is a hidden practice, its evolution is hard to document. Paddling is certainly nothing new. "I've seen a paddle split," says a man who pledged almost 40 years ago. "These ain't love taps we're talking about."

But the slapping around and punching seems to be a more recent phenomenon. Womack supposes it's part of "a change in times." The whole society has become more violent in the last few decades, he says. And "there's always the idea, 'I've got to make it tougher for somebody else.' "

Andrew Young, now a Democratic candidate for governor of Georgia, pledged Alpha Phi Alpha at Howard University in 1949. The extent of the physical hazing, as he recalls, was "running you to the point of exhaustion, and blindfolding you and pushing you around. But there was nothing sadistic or brutal about it."

In fact, says Young, "I really enjoyed my pledging experience. It was sort of like a maturation rite. It was a time of testing under pressure. And I've always said that because I had gone through that process, and learned to hold my cool, I never got excited or upset during the whole civil rights movement. It was good training for facing the Ku Klux Klan, because you learn to keep your head under pressure.

"The hardest thing was keeping you up all night, getting you really fatigued, and then subjecting you to all kinds of things that are inclined to break your spirit," he says. "And when you learn that you can hold on in situations like that, it does give you a tremendous amount of confidence in yourself. So I'm not one to think that the pledging process is all negative.

"But in any group," Young adds, "you get some insecure -- the word really is 'chicken-shit' -- brothers that want to take advantage of other people."

Young says he didn't realize that slapping and punching pledges had become so common. "That's when people start taking out their sickness on people who are defenseless," he says, "and you can't tolerate that."

An Uncertain Future The eight national black fraternities and sororities, founded between 1906 and 1922, patterned themselves after the Greek-letter societies that had taken root on America's college campuses during the 1800s, promoting a fraternal bond based on high ideals and esoteric rituals.

As today's black Greek leaders point out, the founders didn't use a pledge process to bring in members. They sought out students who had something to offer, and signed them up. So as the Omegas' President Moses Norman travels the country and addresses his constituents, he tries to sell the idea of abolishing pledging as "returning to the basis of the eight organizations."

Norman, also an Atlanta public schools superintendent, chaired the council of black fraternity and sorority presidents that met last February in St. Louis. The presidents wanted, for the first time, to come up with a unified approach to hazing. They decided to recommend doing away with pledging altogether -- including such nonviolent traditions as having prospective members dress alike, march or trot around in line, and do silly performances for the amusement of the big brothers and sisters.

The presidents even want to replace the word "pledging" with "membership intake."

"We simply are not going to allow our organizations to have the kind of blighted reputations that they have in regards to pledging," Norman says.

But the council of presidents has no authority over the eight organizations. Each fraternity and sorority determines its own membership process.

In recent years, the groups have tried to deal with hazing by shortening the pledge period. Omega Psi Phi, for instance, put a six-week limit on pledging in 1979, and cut that to four weeks in 1985. But the trouble continued. Some chapters, as with the Alphas at Morehouse, simply engaged in "pre-pledging" hazing.

Now, as each fraternity's leaders try to devise an alternative to pledging, they must confront the ideology of those members who say a rigorous process is necessary to bond men.

"The physical aspect, it makes you want something even more," says Marlow Martin, past president of the Omegas' chapter at the University of Maryland. "You develop a bond with your line brothers very closely. But the bond extends beyond your line brothers to the organization as a whole because you have that common bond -- 'They went through what I went through.' And without that physically and mentally challenging aspect, I don't see how you could put the pressure on people where they would have to lean on each other and develop that bond."

The danger, Martin says, is with certain brothers "taking it to the extreme." But instead of abolishing pledging -- he dismisses the national leaders' proposal as an attempted "quick and easy solution" -- Martin believes the undergraduate and alumni members should work together to develop a process whereby "you can tax people physically and mentally without causing any injury."

While he was overseeing pledges, Martin says, he wasn't the type of brother to get physical. "I would do something else to them besides laying a hand on them. I would play with them mentally," he says. "Just irritating little things like maybe pour some ketchup down the back of their shirt.

"That's not physical abuse, but it still challenges you, because most of us in this area, we're coming from the city. And in the city, you don't let anybody do anything to you. So it teaches you humility," Martin says. "Humility with dignity -- that's what we tell our pledgees. Humility with dignity. Throughout life, you're going to have to be humble, you're going to have to do things you don't want to do. But how you handle the situation is going to determine how you handle your life."

Martin doesn't speak for all undergraduates. John H. Berry, outgoing president of the Alphas' Howard University chapter, says that those who think hazing is valuable "have a distorted view of what a fraternity is all about."

Berry tells of visiting several California campuses last summer and getting "the red-carpet treatment" from brothers who believe certain "negative myths," as he puts it, about the Howard chapter. "They think that we pledge hard and that's something to respect. Little do they know, we probably took less than what they did," he says.

"I think the real power of the fraternity is five, 10 years later," says Berry. "Let's say you have a job in Texas, and you hook up with that local {alumni} chapter, and you find somebody in your field. That can help you in so many ways. That's the real power. It's that major network, that major communication link that you have."

The undergraduates, he says, are "brand new to the fraternity. And those are the people who are causing the most heck."