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ROB'S REPORT: HAZING



When working with young people, there are certain difficult societal problems which we often have to confront. As I have published previously, AEPi recognizes these issues and works diligently to confront them. We know that we will not solve all of society's problems alone but as it is said in *Pirke Avot*, "You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it" (*Pirke Avot* 2:21). AEPi works tirelessly with our students and within a greater context on issues of drugs, alcohol, sexual assault, hazing and mental health; all issues which plague the young adults that we

work with. Even though the good work that our undergraduates do far outweighs and overshadows these issues, I write about them often because, as CEO, it is my job to take on our challenges and to communicate in the spirit of our fraternity... as an open book.

I want to discuss hazing in particular because this week is hazing prevention week (September 25-29) and many of our colleagues on campus and in the fraternity world are utilizing this week to raise awareness and discuss the issue openly.

In addition to the week, September 17 was Gordie Bailey day. Gordie was a pledge at a fraternity at the University of Colorado who died due to hazing related alcohol consumption early in the morning of September 17, 2004. His story is unfortunately too common. Today, it is estimated that there are five deaths each year due to hazing within high school and college organizations. That said, Gordie's story is unique to me because when this happened, I was our AEPi chapter president at University of Colorado. Over the last 15 years or so, many undergrads have heard me tell the story of Gordie Bailey and what a hazing death does to a campus, to a fraternity, and to a family. My alma mater's fight song ends with the words "shoulder to shoulder we will fight fight fight" and, to me, the words "shoulder to shoulder" embodied the spirit of togetherness that permeates the student body and alumni base. The idea that this could happen at my school, within my Greek community, the place where we stand "shoulder to shoulder" with one another shook me to my core. In many ways Gordie's death was an event that charted a course for the next 19 years of my life.

For many years hazing was accepted if not glorified as part of our culture, especially within fraternity life, athletics, and the military. Many of us also experienced forms of hazing at summer camp or in our youth organizations. Others heard stories from our fathers and grandfathers about the hazing that they endured and perpetrated. AEPi was not alone but also not above it. I often hear stories from AEPi alumni about hazing that happened in the 1950s through the 2000s and it is often looked back on fondly or with humor but the world has changed and, in this case, changed for the better. The level of information that is available about hazing today is far superior to any time in our history. Today, we know about the risks and we also know about the invisible scars of mental trauma that come from being hazed and from hazing others.

I am proud that AEPi takes hazing very seriously. I recall a meeting in 2018 shortly after Jim Fleischer (z"l) became AEPi's CEO where he told his senior staff, "Despite our best efforts I don't think we can solve every health and safety issue but I do think that we can make AEPi 100% hazing

free.” We still occasionally find isolated places where hazing is happening, but we intervene quickly when we hear of it and we also proactively educate that it has no place in our fraternity.

I remain concerned that many places where hazing is known to exist are also places where educators, administrators, and community members turn a blind eye. Over the summer a news story broke about Northwestern University. It was found that the school knowingly allowed hazing to exist within its football program. Further sources indicate that it has been widely known that hazing is it pervasive in NU athletics and clubs well beyond that program. The steps that the school took happened only after the news story broke and were – frankly — disingenuous. Northwestern showed the world that hazing prevention is not a priority for them. Unfortunately, Northwestern is just one example of many. We all know that hazing happens in college and seems to openly happen especially within college athletics.

Although I do not pretend to know everything about hazing prevention, we do know that no matter what others say, there are six steps that any organization or institution should take. This is the minimum we should expect and no fraternity or institution should claim that they are unaware or incapable of these steps.

Halt all activity until it is known that activity can resume safely.

Investigate quickly.

Require a low burden of proof in order to take further steps.

Take corrective action by dismissing perpetrators (removing them from your organization or school).

Disqualify negligent leaders from continued leadership.

Take educational action to re-educate bystanders and victims.

AEPi takes each of these steps when we suspect or hear a credible report about hazing.

That said, intervention is the last resort. AEPi utilizes a multifaceted approach to our fight against hazing and most of our efforts are proactive rather than reactive. Each member receives anti-hazing training within their aepi.edu new member e-learning module. This module touches on many issues that are prevalent on campuses and give baseline information straight from AEPi about what is and is not acceptable within our fraternity context. Education continues with visits from regional staff, at regional retreats and conventions, and with chapter advisers.

Our Regional Directors also play an important role. They review plans for new member education with each of their chapters and they stress the fact that AEPi's education does not stop once a member is initiated. AEPi is a four-year learning experience that builds on itself and for those who continue to be involved, learning continues over the course of our lifetime. Once we contextualize new member education (we used to call this pledgship) as something that is very limited to gaining the knowledge one needs to become a brother; we can settle into the reality that this content can be taught in a short period of time.

AEPi has also created a policy whereby chapters are incentivized to utilize a short three-week new member education period and even greater incentives for chapters that wish to embrace a "no pledge" experience. In this scenario, new members are given a classroom-based "AEPi crash course." They learn how the organization works, our history, and our values. They get to know the brothers a bit more formally and they are then given a chance to decide if they will initiate. This may seem like a foreign concept to many of us who went through traditional pledging, but AEPi must embrace the future and the future will be one without pledging. Between university Greek affairs offices developing new policies required for university recognition and our insurance carriers continued evaluation of policy and demand for fraternities to manage risk, the strong likelihood is that pledging will be prohibited. My guess is that this will happen within the next ten years.

The data also supports the concept. AEPi has used data gathered over the past few years to track the length of new member programs (formerly "pledge programs") against other indicators. Chapters with longer pledge periods have lower new member retention, lower member retention overall, and lower levels of participation in other programming. If length of a pledge process is inversely related to these performance metrics, we certainly should reexamine its value.

We intend to do even more. This year, AEPi will become a member of hazingprevention.org. This organization pools resources to combat hazing through research, innovative programming, and continued advocacy. Joining forces with hazingprevention.org unequivocally states that AEPi sides with organizations and universities which believe this problem can be solved and will work toward that end.

Over the coming year, we will also work to ensure that the pipeline of Jewish students coming into college is not predisposed toward negative social behaviors. We will retool some of AEPi's existing educational resources in a way that allows them to be used by Jewish youth organizations and

summer camps and will provide free access to those resources to all organizations that wish to utilize them.

Lastly, AEPi is asking for your help in combatting hazing. As I stated earlier, many of us heard stories from our fathers and grandfathers about the hazing that they endured and perpetrated. I am asking that we think about how those stories are received by our sons and change how we tell them. Studies show that young men seek out rituals which enhance emotional and behavioral autonomy. When role models glorify hazing, young men seek to replicate the experience. Stop joking about these experiences and tell the rest of the story. How did the experience make you feel in the moment? Do you believe that it helped you to become a better person? Did you feel pressured to inflict these "traditions" on others?

Together we can honor the spirit of hazing prevention week, remember Gordie Bailey, and eliminate hazing.