

# **We Can ALL Make a Difference to Stop Hazing**

**- A Mother's Perspective**

By Lianne Kowiak



My intent for writing this is to provide, from a parent's perspective, a mother's perspective, who lost a child, my dearest and only son, to hazing and how everyone can make a difference to help stop these senseless, dangerous and sometime deadly acts from injuring, physically or psychologically, or possibly killing any more of our precious children, one of which may be the very one you hold dearest to your heart.

It was my worst nightmare and certainly every other parent's worst nightmare, as well...not just to receive "a" phone call but to receive "that" phone call waking you from your sleep late at night to hear that your son has been taken to the emergency room. This was the most heart wrenching event I have ever been forced to deal with in my entire life. Losing my own mother to cancer when I was young was one thing. Even at a young age, I knew something dreadful was going to occur. In November 2008, when my husband and I received "that" call, that sudden call, with no preparation for what we were about to hear from the emergency room doctor and later, the law enforcement officer, it was more than a parent or any human being should have to bear. We were told that our dearest son, Harrison, only 19 years of age old, was being airlifted to a trauma center in Charlotte, NC from a smaller regional hospital in Hickory, NC. The story of how he sustained the injuries that ended his precious, young life and broke our hearts had changed completely three times until we finally learned the truth.

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I know I can never bring Harrison back and am grateful I have 19 years of beautiful memories of my son, but I am sad...sad beyond belief. What occurred was so unfair and I miss him dearly. If you knew Harrison, you would have known how warmly and deeply he touched your life. The university Harrison attended also thought he was a very

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special young man, as well, and awarded him an academic and golf scholarship. But what happened? What went so horribly wrong? I didn't get to see him graduate from college, land his first job, marry his future wife, be elated at the sight of my first grandchild as well as experiencing all the special life moments a parent wants and looks forward to for a cherished son or daughter.

Harrison passed away November 2008, and yet the senseless acts of hazing still occur. The hazing can be verbal, psychological or physical abuse. It rears its ugly head in the form of daring or forcing the individual to perform humiliating acts or submit to forms of punishment and abuse which can lead to injury and, unfortunately, sometimes death, as it did with my dearest son, as well as others, each and every year since his loss.

When will it stop? When will it stop once and for all? It will only stop when we take responsibility and become accountable for our actions. Who needs to take responsibility and become accountable for stopping hazing? Everyone. Members involved in student organizations, Inter/National Headquarters overseeing student groups, college/university alumni, administration and staff, parents of any adolescents and/or young adults, community members; we all have the responsibility.

I'm sure all students have a basic idea and understanding of right from wrong. Initially, this needs to be taught at home. When away from home, as parents, we rely on others to keep our children safe. We rely on others to help our children make healthy and smart decisions, and most times,

individually, students will do what's "right." As I mention when talking to high school or college students, I remind them to do the "mom test." Is the activity one you would be comfortable being a part of if your mom were watching? Unfortunately, in a group setting, it is more likely that members of that group will do things that an individual normally would never do alone, sometimes very dangerous things. They may hide these dangerous activities under the guise of "traditions."

I'm all for tradition. Thanksgiving is a tradition, as is celebrating the Fourth of July. These are safe traditions that have genuine meaning and purpose. However, being unexpectedly tackled by fraternity brothers dressed in black colored clothing, while the pledges are told to wear white, so they could be more easily be seen as targets, is beyond asinine. It is senseless, dangerous, and in Harrison's case, it was deadly.

I know there is a "brotherhood" or "sisterhood" when you are part of a fraternity or sorority. They are supposed to be there for one another in times of need and many fraternities and sororities engage in a number of worthwhile, philanthropic causes to help the community. My question is: where were his "brothers" on that cold evening in November 2008? When Harrison suffered such severe head trauma that he fell into a coma within minutes and passed away from his injuries? Where was the sense of right and wrong that night? Where was the personal responsibility? Why wasn't 911 called immediately?

In order to monitor the actions of organizations on a university campus, there needs to be communication and transparency. Neither the National

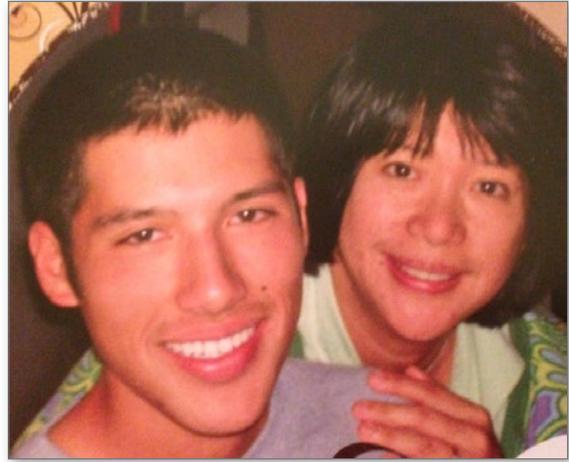
Fraternity, nor the university said they knew what the local fraternity was doing. Where are the checks and balances? Internally, at the local chapter level, what stopped another fraternity member from taking initiative to stand up, stop the behaviors, and do what was right?

Closing a student group or firing individuals from a school or university is only a “band aid” approach, after a hazing incident or death. It is reactive. What is the root cause, why is hazing still happening, why isn’t there more accountability across the board?

As a mom, I heard the word “hazing” but thought it was a thing of the past. I didn’t realize that hazing was still occurring on college and university campuses. I was shocked and absolutely sick to my stomach when I learned of the dangerous and senseless “traditions” Harrison had to go through, as a pledge, in order to be accepted, in order to belong. Many reading this may say Harrison could have opted out and he could have said no, but unfortunately, he, nor the other pledge had any idea what they would be put through on that field, in the dark of night.

Here is my request to each and every one of you. Do what you can to MAKE A DIFFERENCE. I have been asked to share Harrison’s story at the Sigma Phi Epsilon Southeast Leadership conference, the Lambda Theta Alpha National Convention,

the Pi Alpha Phi National Conference, the University of Tampa, and this fall, at the University of South Florida. I also have spoken locally at the high school level to up and coming university students. If I was able to touch one person or fifty, but hopefully hundreds, it was time well spent. I want to MAKE A DIFFERENCE. Will you?



*Lianne Kowiak is a wife and mother of two, Harrison and Emma. She continues to share Harrison’s story so others are aware of the dangers of hazing. She has been interviewed by Current TV, Al Jazeera America, Bloomberg News, and Huffington Post. Lianne also volunteers for Hazing Prevention.org. Lianne can be contacted at [Lkowiak@hotmail.com](mailto:Lkowiak@hotmail.com).*

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