

## MEN OF PRINCIPLE

### *Hazing Culture in America and the Need for Change*

A Pumphrey Law Scholarship Essay by Evan J. Mizerak

**Prompt: Write an essay (800-1000 words) on the impact of hazing. Discuss the damages to academic careers as well as personal life and how to raise awareness and work toward prevention.**

Tim Piazza arrived on campus at Penn State in 2015 interested in majoring in mechanical engineering. Like most college freshmen, he dreaded the math homework, but it was nothing that he - an accomplished athlete and dedicated community service volunteer - couldn't juggle. After all, this was the same kid that promoted sports for special needs children in his hometown, maintained a healthy relationship with his high school sweetheart, and endeavored to design prosthetic limbs for children and soldiers after graduating.

So why not add "fraternity member" to his long list of titles? Pledge night was coming up, and the male camaraderie that accompanied being a "brother" of Beta Theta Pi seemed enviable. Its mission statement sought to develop "men of principle," and all it would take is a "gentleman's pledge" - one night of initiation in early February of his sophomore year.

When Tim died in the early morning of February 4, 2017, his blood alcohol content (BAC) was 0.40 and just over half of his skull had been removed to accommodate brain swelling resulting from a traumatic fall. Jim and Evelyn Piazza's youngest son - their baby - was a registered organ donor, but his body was so damaged after a single evening that doctors could barely manage to harvest one kidney. The inexpressible tragedy of Tim Piazza's death is harrowing, sickening, and appalling.<sup>1</sup>

But worst of all? It isn't an outlier.

The normalization of hazing culture in the United States continues to claim the lives of high school and collegiate students alike, a disturbing trend that demands reform. Hazing tends to occur primarily in two realms of society - athletics and greek life. Each of these settings presents its own unique challenges to the cultivation of a healthier academic and social environment for American students, challenges that show no sign of dissipating. Since 1970, there has been at least one hazing-related college death every year.<sup>2</sup> Worse yet, survey results indicate that for 47% of undergraduates, hazing began before college.<sup>3</sup> A deep-seated issue in American culture, such sustained abuse is near-ubiquitous.

So why hasn't anything been done?

Prior to delving into the numerous ill effects of hazing, I think that it is important to understand the causes of the practice, and why they place victims in such a difficult position. Often fraudulently dubbed "initiation," an instance of hazing serves as a rite of passage, whether it be for a Greek life chapter or athletic team. Because they are motivated by a desire to *fit in*, hazing practices place an intrinsic pressure on those who participate. By definition, they promote an unhealthy sense of necessity, which is part of the reason that, despite over 250,000 annual reports of hazing coming from

student-athletes alone, over 60% stated that they would not report the heinous behavior that they witnessed - a startling figure that signifies a tremendous and potentially fatal disservice to their peers.<sup>4</sup>

The profound dangers of hazing are deleterious not only to one's academic career, but to personal lives as well. Obsession with successfully traversing one's first "pledging" experience can derail a student's studies, and discipline resulting from infractions on a school's honor code could result in the loss of a scholarship - or, worse, dismissal. It is not uncommon for hazing events to stretch into the early hours of the morning, leaving little opportunity for rest or coursework. Perhaps even more subtly damaging than a poor GPA is the threat of psychological trauma. Often, hazing results in the gradual development of depression, social withdrawal, and shame.<sup>5</sup> We also can't forget that each experience is individualized, and these results could be further exacerbated for students who enter college or high school having endured a past history of bullying or abuse. Cumulatively, college administrations must recognize that the self esteem drop that invariably results from hazing can lead to roads that culminate in tragedies of their own, like addiction and self harm.

Moving forward, it is imperative that efforts be made to raise awareness of hazing outcomes in an effort to prevent permanent physical and emotional trauma. Such efforts must begin by imploring students to make use of the administrative faculty: recent estimates approximate that over 93% of hazing goes unreported, with 36% of students feeling as though there simply *aren't* resources available with which to report concerning activity. In short? We are *failing our students* by not making crisis aid available to them. Furthermore, alcohol education needs to be instituted as a fundamental prerequisite in every American student's pre-orientation checklist. With over 30% of students reporting the involvement of "extreme alcohol consumption" in most instances of hazing, excess has become practically synonymous with Greek life and athletic initiations alike.<sup>6</sup> It is important that students understand their limits and, perhaps more importantly, the consequences that come with ignoring them.

When it comes to prevention, responsibility starts at the top. Studies have found that over 22% of the time, especially in athletic settings, figures such as coaches are complicit in initiation rituals of unacceptable nature. In addition to the institution of a zero-tolerance policy of hazing on college and high school campuses, it must be understood that self-governance is simply impractical in undergraduate Greek life. For example, the house at which Tim Piazza pledged in February 2017 was officially alcohol free. How, then, did his BAC rise to 800% of the legal limit? While fraternity life is a formative experience for many nostalgic alumni, it is simply criminal to assert that alcohol is necessary to an environment of brother/sisterhood.

If anything has become jarringly clear, it is that incremental change does not lead to progress. Far-reaching overhauls are the only way around America's current hazing problem, and time isn't on our side - but the significance of the cause is.

When asked why they still tirelessly fight for justice, the answer from the Piazza family was simple.

"All we have is the ability to make a difference for other people. We're trying. That's what he would want."

## REFERENCES

1. Wallace, Benjamin. "How a Fatal Frat Hazing Became Penn State's Latest Campus Crisis." *VanityFair.com*, Vanity Fair, 2 Oct. 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/10/penn-state-fraternity-hazing-death](http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/10/penn-state-fraternity-hazing-death).
2. "Hazing Death Statistics." *BrandonGaille.com*, Education News, 2017. <https://brandongaille.com/22-shocking-hazing-deaths-statistics/>
3. Reilly, Katie. "Fraternity Hazing: Why It's So Hard to Stop Student Deaths." *Time.com*, Time, 11 Oct. 2017, [time.com/4976836/fraternity-hazing-deaths-reform-tim-piazza/](http://time.com/4976836/fraternity-hazing-deaths-reform-tim-piazza/).
4. Hoover, Nadne. "National Survey: Initiation Rites and Athletics for NCAA Sports Teams." *Alfred.edu*, Alfred University, 30 August 2003. [https://alfred.edu/about/news/studies/\\_docs/hazing.pdf](https://alfred.edu/about/news/studies/_docs/hazing.pdf)
5. "Hidden Harm of Hazing." *HazingPrevention.org*, Hazing Prevention, 2018. <https://hazingprevention.org/home/hazing/hidden-harm/>
6. "Important Hazing Statistics." *Babson.edu*, Babson College, 2018. <http://www.babson.edu/student-life/community-standards/hazing/Pages/important-hazing-statistics.aspx>