

## Tapped Out

The party's over for University of Oregon fraternities; will OSU be the next sitting duck?

By Anne Le Chevallier

November, 2002

Sean Matsuda still had a few weeks of studying before he finished his first year at Oregon State University. It was only May, but he was about to taste summer.

Matsuda was fleeing the state on a road trip with his new brothers, members of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. Their escape plan: three days at California's Lake Shasta, three days of freedom. The members and their friends planned to blare Dave Matthews' songs while lounging on the sunny roofs of their houseboats. They would take dips in the lake and attempt to drench each other in water. They would grill burgers and relax with beers or cocktails.

Katie Hamm, a UO student, was among the 3,000 students who trekked to the vast lake for the annual getaway that weekend. Hamm said many students would drink from 9 a.m. until almost sunrise the next day. "It wasn't for me," she said. "I could never do that or want to do that, but college kids will be college kids, I guess."

Hamm was on the same houseboat as Matsuda on May 11, 2001 when the 19-year-old freshman died. "Everything seemed under control," she said. "No one was going crazy or out of control. All the wrong circumstances - drinking, being tired, the boats, the way the water moved -together they created something awful."

Matsuda had started drinking around 11 a.m. Five hours later, when Matsuda tried to jump from one houseboat to another, he fell, hit the back of his head on a railing and disappeared into the water. Immediately, Hamm and other witnesses jumped in and tried to rescue their friend. Because of the water's murkiness, Matsuda could not be found until 15 or 20 minutes after he fell. He was dead.

"It was a nightmare," Hamm said. "It was the most horrible experience of my life."

This March, tragedy struck OSU again when Spencer Haugh was visiting friends at Kappa Sigma fraternity. Haugh, a 20-year-old art major, had been rocking back and forth on the fire escape railing when he fell three stories to a concrete patio. His blood alcohol content was at least .20 - more than twice the level at which an Oregon driver is considered drunk. Haugh sustained severe head and spinal injuries, and five days later his parents removed him from life support.

"The end result was a wake up call; it was legitimately a wake up call for everybody," said OSU Greek Life Coordinator Bob Kerr.

The tragic deaths might have alerted all, but it is the University of Oregon, where no students died, that is taking action. Last May, University President Dave Frohnmayer approved prohibition on campus Greeks. His new standards require all Greek chapters to have alcohol and drug-free housing.

For some, the change is not dramatic. All the sororities are substance-free, and UO already has a handful of substance-free fraternities who emphasize brotherhood, scholarship and service. They neither use alcohol to recruit nor to enliven their in-house social functions.

But there are also a number of fraternities who maintain reputations as beer-guzzling, pot smoking slackers. Inside Beta Theta Pi hangs a testament to the popularity of this image: a poster of "National Lampoon's Animal House." The 1978 comedy - filmed on the UO campus - is not a documentary. But the story of the fictional '60s school, Faber College, captures an element of truth when it tells of a struggle between reckless youth, their stogy peers and the administration. The Deltas are losers whose interests are beer, drugs, sex, pranks and beer. The stuck-up Omegas conspire with the dean to remove their counterparts. After the Deltas throw a wild toga party, the dean revokes their charter, and the Deltas wreak anarchy on campus.

Here's the world of the modern drinking fraternity: The UO chapter of Beta Theta Pi volunteered to paint the "O" marking on Skinner's Butte. It earns better grades than most wet chapters, it voted to go dry for a term last year as a sort of self-discipline, and it has alcohol and social education programs.

Chapter President Shane Meisel said, "We try to educate the guys because men are already stupid. We tell them what's right and wrong."

But members of the Beta house also partake in the Greek system's nightlife. Junior Taylor Lewis explained that his chapter hosts parties in its dark, soundproof basement, which has a sticky dance floor and space for playing drinking games. Speed quarters and beer pong are popular. On the third floor, guys in oxford shirts and college women in make-up and skirts stand on the stained carpet or sit on the grimy couch. At some parties, female guests rotate bedrooms and down drinks like peppermint paddy shots or sweet-tasting kamikazes. Members nurse a cold can of Pabst, which they retrieved from the trough in the bathroom. Lewis said if anyone wants to smoke weed, they have to go outside. Otherwise, the partygoers mingle and play drinking games until the early morning.

"It's a fun, laid-back atmosphere," said Lewis. "We have a good group of friends that come, and we try to keep it as exclusive as possible."

The parties are fun for most partygoers, but for the president they are a headache. Other members take shifts as the sober brother or bouncer, and they try to ensure their female guests a ride or an escort home. But if anyone pukes, or is incoherent, belligerent or reckless, the consequences could fall on Meisel's shoulders. He could be responsible and liable for everything that happens in his house.

Meisel and his fraternity brothers might be more cautious and better organized than the Animal House, but their struggle is the same. Beta Theta Pi and other wet fraternities are waging a losing battle against the university to keep their way of life. The Greeks tried disagreeing with the administrators; then their national leaders wrote letters to Frohnmayer objecting to the standards. Their remaining choice is to comply or close.

Not only is the University requiring all Greek chapters to be alcohol and drug free this fall, but the chapters must also meet endorsement standards in academic performance,

leadership, community service and property management. If the chapters fail to meet or progress toward these standards within a year, they will lose the university's services. Like Dean Wormer of "Animal House," Frohnmayer will ask their national headquarters to revoke their charters.

Meisel thinks the university's motive for the new policy is to polish its image at the expense of the chapters. "It makes the university look very good on paper to the press and national organizations if they look at all our chapters do," he said. He believes this campus makeover will hurt the Greek system's membership and cause chapters to close.

Greg Lobisser, the UO administrator who proposed the new policy, agrees UO might lose some chapters. But he believes Greek chapters benefit from the university's reputation, and if they want to be affiliated with it, the school should have the authority to create some standards to define the quality of the chapters.

"If we are to endorse them," said Lobisser, the director of student activity, "we want to do that with confidence that they are healthy places to be."

Meisel calls this idea discriminatory. Fraternities and sororities are self-governing, non-profit organizations who have a legacy of deciding what is best for themselves. Now, the university is intruding into the Greek system's established and independent form of government. The university is requiring more of Greeks than other student organizations and holding them to stricter standards than residents of the dorms, where 21-year-olds are permitted to drink in their rooms.

"The Greek system is just another student organization," Meisel said, "But by forcing us to go dry, the university is singling us out as if we were different ... It is treating us like children instead of letting 18 to 22-year-old adults govern their own chapters, but it's not the university's responsibility at all; it's not their business. It's up to the national organization of each individual chapter to improve and help them."

Meisel and many fraternity members think the new policy is unfair, but the Greek system may have treated its alcohol and membership problems with enough disregard that the university now feels the need to force changes and better protect its students and itself.

Lobisser said the university is concerned the fraternities' founding values had been blurred by an emphasis on social functions and alcohol use, which he said is a self-fulfilling problem. Lobisser said the Greek system's membership has remained flat despite increases in the number of students enrolling at Oregon. In order to recruit and maintain members, UO fraternities have increasingly relied on drinking and parties. Simultaneously, heavy drinkers are attracted to the Greek system because they know it will support or promote their habit.

The university comes armed into this debate with studies and statistics that repeatedly report the Greek system's alcohol abuse. A 1997 survey by the Harvard School of Public Health indicated that about 40 percent of college students are binge drinkers. But the survey showed the strongest indicator for binge drinking was living in a fraternity or sorority house. Eighty percent of sorority women and 86 percent of fraternity men living in Greek housing qualified as binge drinkers.

Police records also show alcohol use by Greeks in Oregon is a high-risk behavior with expensive consequences. According to Eugene police department reports, from 1997

through 2001, police cited 136 students at UO fraternities with misdemeanor violations of underage drinking. Police cited almost 20 people at fraternities for furnishing alcohol to minors or allowing a minor to drink on the property. They also investigated five alleged sexual assaults at fraternities but made no arrests.

OSU fraternities have also been continually caught defying state liquor laws and contributing to underage drinking. Sigma Phi Epsilon, the fraternity of Sean Matsuda, has been a flagrant violator: Four months after Matsuda's death, the chapter was busted by Corvallis police for a party of more than 250 people. They cited 35 partygoers for underage drinking, and they cited the fraternity with more than 26 counts of furnishing alcohol to minors. Police seized more than 250 cans and bottles of beer and more than two dozen bottles of hard alcohol. One fraternity member was hospitalized for alcohol poisoning.

A judge reduced the fraternity's fine from \$30,000 to \$10,000 on the condition it would remain alcohol-free for two years.

UO Greeks say the new policy may cause such massive fraternity parties to stop, but they argue the policy will be ineffective at stopping underage and binge drinking. They say fraternities can chug as much beer and throw as many parties as they want until they are caught. Afterwards, the parties will just move from fraternities to "live-outs" - homes or apartments of older members who live in local neighborhoods.

Eugene residents are concerned the new policy could cause more parties in student housing, which is spread among several neighborhoods and even the Willamette River. With more parties come more noise, traffic, reckless behavior and drinking and driving.

Sally Smith, president of the South University Neighborhood Association, says student-neighbors are already disruptive. They loud music, talk and laugh until 2 a.m. Sometimes they trash their yards, knock down street signs, and urinate in public. Smith, who has worked at UO for almost four decades, said, "Students live in neighborhoods, but they are not really neighbors. A neighbor is concerned about what somebody else thinks and feels."

Smith believes fraternities have more control of their residents than absentee landlords. She is concerned that if Greek members must find off-campus locations to drink, the situation in her neighborhood could worsen.

Meisel believes off-campus parties are less safe. "In our fraternity," he said, "There are members who watch for those sort of things. Off campus, there is more anonymity. Students are not worried about how their house is going to look or if their president is going to come down on them. They are going to act however they want."

He added that even if Greeks don't drink at fraternities, drinking accidents could still occur.

"It can happen anywhere," he said. "People can leave, get extremely drunk, come back to the chapter house and fall off the balcony."

Lobisser doesn't pretend the policy will lead to abstinence of alcohol and he doesn't know how the policy will affect off-campus parties. His goal is to move the alcohol out of the fraternity houses. This change, he believes, will create healthy living environments

more conducive to academic performance. The experience of Greek alumnus Uri Farkas suggests substance-free Greek living might be the best choice.

Farkas joined the University of Montana's Phi Gamma Delta chapter in 1994. He said that on any given night in his wet fraternity house, members would bring over friends or friends of friends. "At parties," he added, "People were drinking a lot, getting soaked, and no one seemed to care."

In 1996, after a series of incidents, a fight between football players and fraternity members broke the camel's back. The school's Greek leaders voted to go dry.

Farkas said the most immediate improvement to his chapter was its house appearance. It had new carpet, television, couches and stereo. "Before, we had never invested," he said, "but we felt more ownership and pride knowing we didn't have so many strangers coming in, leaving half empty bottles all over the place."

Farkas, a UO counselor for student athletes, also saw the fraternity's recruitment numbers begin to increase. More men interested in leadership, service and academics gravitated toward the fraternity rather than those who wanted a place to drink. He said, "We were attracting a better quality individual."

Not only was the quality of Farkas's fraternity's membership improving, but so was the quality of his experience. He explained, "There were times when we were throwing a great party - an all out bash - and I was thinking, 'This is what fraternity or college life is all about.' But after the change, I realized that maybe great parties are not what fraternities are supposed to be about. I could have found the social aspects anywhere, but the friendship was there for guys who wanted to stick it out."

As Farkas finished his degree at the Missoula school, some chapters began to decline, and the houses unable or unwilling to adjust no longer have charters on campus. His friends and classmates who drank heavily did not stop their alcohol use, but Farkas said his home was no longer a place for drinkers to hang out all evening.

Farkas's chapter and campus were ahead of the game. Phi Gamma Delta had considered a national ban on alcohol in the late 1990s, when the national movement toward dry housing began. However, the fraternity did not solidify its decision until 1997 when a pledge at its MIT chapter fell into a coma after binge drinking and died. The fraternity was indicted for manslaughter and hazing, and the school paid almost \$5 million to the freshman's parents. Now, Phi Gamma Delta is one of almost a dozen fraternities to have alcohol-free housing initiatives. These fraternities have reduced risk of lawsuits and get breaks on insurance premiums.

There are strong health and financial reasons for going dry, yet OSU has no plans to change its Greek system. OSU Greek Life Coordinator Bob Kerr explained, "Coming from someone who has done this for a long time," he said, "The solution lies somewhere other than mandatory substance-free housing."

After the two deaths, and UO's decision to change, many Beaver parents and alumni are asking questions. But Kerr, who has worked with Greeks for almost three decades, is asking for patience. He says kicking Greeks out, moving recruitment to later terms, or going dry without student feedback are quick fixes to a complex and challenging situation.

People want answers now. Kerr says that works if you are a football team trying to score a touchdown; it doesn't work if you are interested in sustaining an institution and establishing a lifetime of healthy conduct for students. He wants to continue building relationships among Greek leaders before they try to find a "slow and methodical" approach to the problem. "I do not feel we need an answer tomorrow because UO is changing," Kerr says. "We are going to school on UO."