



No Easy Answers, but Don't Cast All of Greek Life in a Negative Light

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by Jay Paterno on June 15, 2017 5:00 AM

This spring, in response to a tragic story, the Greek life system at Penn State has justifiably come under scrutiny. The discussion has even escalated to question the very need for and existence of fraternities and sororities at Penn State. On the face of it, it is easy to render judgment when we see these distressing news stories. But should we, in judgment, apply the actions of the few to an entire group of people?

First, be sure that this column is not to judge or assign blame for what happened in February. Due process should afford a deliberate review of the facts under the law.



This column is focused on repeated condemnation of the Greek system at Penn State and across the nation. The coverage often reports statistics about the higher prevalence of alcohol use and sexual assaults committed by members of fraternities. Without reporting the methodology, these survey results have been given the weight of “statistics” and stated as indisputable fact.

Survey “statistics” are not scientific facts and reporting often omits context. Several years ago Sports Illustrated published an article stating that 7 percent of all college football players on teams in the Top 25 had been charged with a crime. That number was used to hammer home the idea that college football was overrun with bad kids given a pass by coaches and universities.

Within minutes we located FBI crime statistics showing college-aged men in America were being convicted of crimes at a 50 percent higher rate than college football players were simply being charged with crimes. Facts and context matter.

Shaping the picture of a story to fit your premise is at best not fair and at worst reveals a deeper agenda. The word agenda is important, because it appears that we are using this tragedy to vilify the majority in the Greek system. To be sure, like all human institutions, the Greek system is not perfect. But it is also not all a dark, shadowy world of elitism, alcoholism and misogyny that some would have you believe.

Recently I was reminded of the underlying purpose and strength of the Greek system. The brothers of Penn State’s Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity were hosting a golf outing to honor a brother who’d lost his battle with brain cancer.

Their brother Andrew Garwood (at left in the photo) died while he was still a Penn State student. In his time at Penn State his leadership spoke to the character of many fraternity brothers. As a junior he became DKE president. While undergoing treatment for his brain cancer and against the advice of his doctors and family, he danced all 46 hours in Penn State’s Dance Marathon to raise money for others with pediatric cancer.

But this story is also about the fraternity. After Andrew’s diagnosis, the brothers of DKE put together schedules of shifts to make sure they would be there to help him when he had treatments, or when he was studying or whenever they just didn’t want him to be alone. During the last days of his life, many of them flew out to see him at their own expense.

What a true testament to brotherhood.

But we’ve become a cynical society. All of us have a tendency to jump on our worst beliefs about people we don’t know or groups to which we do not belong.

We readily believe the worst rumors, yet demand irrefutable proof to accept the good in others.

We overlook stories like the DKE brothers. We overlook the kind of people the Greek system attracts. We hide behind survey statistics that may or may not be accurate to point the finger at a whole group of people.

Certainly the success and the impact of the Dance Marathon is an example of what the Greek system can accomplish. But it runs deeper.

At its most basic level the Greek system provides young people in a new school with a home base. At large schools new students can become overwhelmed by the size of the school.

A fraternity or sorority is a place where students can downsize college in a smaller community with others who help them find their social niche. Through shared experiences and the help of others going through the same ups, downs and emotions, they lay the foundations of their college career.

The Greek system also anchors them to the campus, giving them a sense of place they return to visit for years to come. For as the weeks after graduation turn to years and into decades many of their enduring friends and memories of college are rooted in their college fraternity or sorority.

But given recent events, what comes next? To be sure there are no easy answers, but we must resist the urge to only see them simply through the prism of the negative light. Weight must also be given to the good that is done. But just as surely as it is not perfect and there are flaws to be addressed, powerful reasons remain to see the value of what these institutions have been and can be for the future.