

Fraternities deciding party's over

By SUNNI DeNICOLA

His head pounded as the familiar smell of sour beer and stale cigarettes seeped into his consciousness. Slowly the morning light brought the remnants of last night's revelry into clear view. He was on the floor in the middle of what had been the newly refurbished living room. Now it was trashed. he felt sick.

This is the kind of experience that more college fraternities are trying to avoid by going substance-free. Alcohol and parties often create potential liabilities such as property damage, personal injury, and assault. In serious cases, chapters are suspended and lawsuits are brought against both the chapter and the national fraternity.

Now some fraternities are changing their party-animal image by banning alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes from the house and from fraternity gatherings.

In early April, Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) at Monmouth College, a small, liberal arts college in Illinois, voted to become substance-free, joining others such as the ATO chapter at Indiana University-Bloomington, Sigma Chi at University of Maine, and Lambda Chi Alpha chapters at Northeastern State in Oklahoma, Louisiana Tech, and Valparaiso University in Indiana.

"The most important reason we did this was for liability concerns," says Kris Kline, President of ATO at Monmouth. "With everyone being so litigation-happy we don't want to put ourselves in a position where we inadvertently serve (alcohol to) a minor, or have someone fall off our porch, hurt themselves and sue the chapter. We risk losing the whole fraternity just for the sake of having a party in our house. That's not worth it."

Like most other substance-free fraternities, ATO had a serious wake-up call before making this decision. When Kline joined ATO, he concedes it had a bit of the "Animal House" reputation. He said they began having difficulties such as an outstanding debt to the national fraternity and some fire code violations due partly to damage from hearty partying.

These problems led the national ATO organization to step in last year and remove most of the membership. In the end, three members remained. They quickly pledged 11 members, the largest

class of any fraternity that year. Soon they will move back into their newly renovated house, funded with donations from ATO alumni. Like some other groups, a restored house was another factor in going substance-free.

"We're tired of cleaning up our house after parties... the sticky floors, cigarette butts stuck on your wall, people breaking stuff, and showing total disrespect for your living environment," says Kline. "So we are trying to eliminate that factor by taking away the alcohol. People who aren't drunk usually don't destroy things."

Kline says members want a place where they aren't ashamed to bring their girlfriends or family members.

"If you can't bring those people into your fraternity, then there's something wrong; you are hiding something that you seem to value too highly," he said.

The success of their brother chapter at Indiana University encouraged fraternity members in the decision.

At Indiana University, ATO was dissolved in 1992 as a result of alcohol-related problems, culminating in the hospitalization of two members for near-fatal alcohol consumption. Their prized fraternity house was leased to another fraternity.

This motivated ATO alumni to re-establish the chapter as substance-free, an idea they wanted to test for some time. Because a university sanction prohibited any of the original members from participating in the new chapter, they had to start over completely.

In less than one year, they recruited 40 members and have the distinction of being the first substance-free organization at any Big Ten institution. Next fall they move back into their house.

"We believe a growing number of college men want to live in a substance-free environment and simply need to be provided that opportunity in a fraternity setting," says Wynn Smiley, director of communication for ATO headquarters.

"A lot of people, many times for good reason, look at the fraternity scene as totally revolving around alcohol — party central. I think that scares away some people who would otherwise be interested," he said. "Offering a substance-free environment allows those true benefits of a fraternity to rise to the top. They still like to have a good time, but the social aspect, the alcohol aspect, is not all-consuming."

Indiana's administration, like most, is very supportive of the substance-free pledge. Richard McKaig, dean of students, says it is an effective "recruiting ploy" in that it offers something different. ATO competes with 30 other fraternity chapters on campus for membership. He says it is a growing trend nationwide for students to request smoke-free housing and adopt healthier lifestyles.

Still, McKaig acknowledges, "many students wonder if it's going to work or even if they'll live up to the ideal they've stated. My experience with the young men involved is that they truly have a commitment to that philosophy and I think they definitely will be

living up to it."

While not pressuring chapters to go substance-free, the national fraternities, where risk management is a top concern, also endorse the concept.

"ATO is going to be promoting substance-free at a greater level based on what we know already from watching Indiana's success," says Smiley. "But we don't want to twist any arms. We believe it will work only when the men understand what is going on in the chapter and they want to be a part of the kind of environment."

Sigma Chi at the University of Maine is another substance-free success story. In 1991, the chapter was nearly banned after hosting a drunken bash where the house was damaged, and later, a woman alleged she was raped. The chapter was already on probation for previous alcohol violations.

When the national Sigma Chi announced it wanted the chapter to go substance-free, all but one member quit. When Tyler Batteese (now graduated) and an advisor began rebuilding the chapter, few thought they would

succeed. Now Sigma Chi has 32 members, exceeding the average membership of the 13 other campus fraternities. Even the fraternity house, that once brunt of drunken melees, is being revitalized. The chapter is investing \$250,000 in a total renovation.

Lambda Chi Alpha's three chapters have similar stories. The latest is at Valparaiso where the suspended chapter is being reorganized as substance-free.

The chapter at Northeastern State in Oklahoma, founded as substance-free in 1988, has been successful, even during a rough period when some members decided they no longer wanted to be substance-free and left.

At Louisiana Tech, the chapter decided to become substance-free in 1992 when it began having problems.

"They decided to get back to their founding principles of high academic standards, gentlemanly conduct, leadership development, and lifelong friendships," says Walter Jenkins, director of communications and conferences for Lambda Chi Alpha headquarters. "None of these things need alcohol to happen."

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9. Only a two-and-a-half hour drive to Atlantic or Wrightsville Beach.
8. Beats living at home with parents.
7. Better than a summer job at the local McGrease.
6. College romances are steamier in the summer.
5. Research has shown a direct, positive correlation between high humidity and improved test scores.
4. Ice cream socials at the Vice President's houses.
3. After heavy summer rain, can go swimming in pond in front of administration building.
2. Air conditioners droning in the classrooms makes falling asleep in middle of lecture much easier.
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