

Hazing incident puts new focus on debate

By Meagan Pant
Staff Writer

A fraternity at Wilmington College is under a criminal investigation after a pledge lost a testicle during a Halloween eve initiation ritual, and the incident has thrust the Quaker-affiliated school into the national spotlight on hazing on college campuses.

Clinton County Municipal Court records show that three prospective Gamma Phi Gamma members were taken into the basement of the fraternity's off-campus house and blindfolded during an initiation that involved the 20 members in the late hours of Oct. 30.

They were told to imitate swimming in as much as three inches of water on the basement floor, made to stand and strip naked, applied with "a substance described as being like ICY HOT," had Limburger cheese and other items put in their mouths, instructed to make sexually explicit movements and "struck with towels and shirts that had the ends balled in knots or items tied inside to inflict pain," according to a search warrant from Wilmington Detective Brian Kratzer.

One of the pledges suffered damage to his testicles when he was struck with a towel — "fashioned as a weapon" — and was later taken to the Clinton Memorial Hospital emergency room for surgery to have one of them removed, according to the warrant.

"The pledge was told to fight back, however each would still have the blindfold on rendering him defenseless," Kratzer wrote. He noted also that all three pledges showed "evidence of bruising and contusions" suffered during the initiation.

Wilmington College President Jim Reynolds called the incident "dis-

gusting and despicable" and said the school will have to hold a larger conversation on hazing.

Experts say it is difficult to monitor hazing, which is so widespread that 55 percent of college students involved in an organization say they have experienced it, according to a widely cited national study. But the Wilmington incident has rekindled debate over what schools can do to better protect students against the unwanted harassment they sometimes face when joining student organizations.

The Wilmington Police Department has turned over the findings of its investigation to Clinton County Prosecutor Richard Moyer, who said his office is not commenting on the issue at this time. Wilmington police Chief Duane Weyand said the case could be presented to a grand jury as early as next month for possible criminal charges.

Zero tolerance

Reynolds said every member of the fraternity implicated in the hazing incident had signed the college's anti-hazing policy, just like everyone in a Greek organization there is asked to do. The college also holds anti-hazing discussions every semester, he said.

Many U.S. colleges and universities have zero-tolerance policies on hazing. Still, the 2008 national study found that in 95 percent of hazing cases, students did not report the incident to campus officials.

The 19-year-old sophomore, Tyler Lawrence, injured on Halloween told

Cincinnati media he believes it was an accident. Lawrence and a second pledge allegedly hazed, Wesley Pearson, could not be reached for comment.

The third pledge, Ryan Macella, declined to be interviewed, telling the newspaper via email "no matter how many articles you publish... (it's) not going to change anything one bit."

The defense "clearly shows that there's some kind of bonding that came out of hazing and that's the perverse side of it," said Hank Nuwer, a Franklin College journalism professor and a national expert on anti-hazing.

Through extensive education and discussions, Miami University has created a culture where "people know it's not OK" to haze, said Jenny Levering, director of the Cliff Alexander Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life and Student Activities at Miami Univer-

sity.

But, she said, "we still have problems. We haven't been able to absolutely fix it."

Part of the challenge for universities is that hazing extends beyond Greek organizations and into nearly any kind of student group, Levering said.

"As long as you've got groups that are selective in membership, there's going to be this sense of, 'Well, we need to do something to make them earn it,'" she said. "Until we can get away from that mentality, we are always going to have to teach them different ways of immersing people in their organizations."

Incidents occur in high school and, as seen in recent weeks, among adults as well. Miami Dolphins' football player Jonathan Martin was allegedly bullied and hazed by his teammate Richie Incognito in a case that has embroiled the NFL.

Hazing incidents are more widely reported than in the past, but punishment – especially criminal charges – varies widely by state, Nuwer said. Forty-four states, including Ohio, have anti-hazing laws.

Stopping hazing is a challenge, especially at the local level, he said.

"If the chapter is determined to haze... it's difficult to police unless you have a house that allows the campus adviser or police to visit at will," said Nuwer, who published a book on the topic called "The Hazing Reader."

'A larger conversation'

Reynolds said Wilmington immediately suspended Gamma Phi Gamma after learning of the incident, and the students involved will go through the campus judicial process to determine whether punishment is warranted. The punishment could be as severe as dismissal of the students. They would then have the option to appeal their punishment to another board and finally to the president himself, Reynolds said.

Reynolds said the alleged hazing is "incongruent with our values."

About 20 percent of Wilmington's 1,000 undergraduates are members of Greek organizations, Reynolds said. Gamma Phi Gamma, commonly referred to as the Gobblers, is a local organization that has no national affiliation. It was founded in 1907, according to its website. The fraternity adviser, Vinton M. Prince, declined to comment, and said he was not present during the alleged hazing.

Reynolds said his campus will discuss the issue after the disciplinary process is finished.

"As a Quaker college, we have a special relationship with each other and we have to go through a period of not only self reflection but also what would be considered truth telling and then reconciliation," he said. "I think it's a larger conversation and it's something that has to happen on our campus that involved everyone."