

## **Four Rules for Saving a Fraternity**

**At Linfield College, one house's president brought his chapter back from the brink**

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After taking over as president of the Theta Chi fraternity at Linfield College last fall, Justin Samples lost 15 pounds and the ability to sleep through the night. That is what the constant stress of trying to rein in an out-of-control fraternity will do to a 20-year-old.

So it was a surprise that last year on Halloween, a night known for pranks and mayhem, he dozed off at 10 p.m.

His slumber, however, was brief. At 2 a.m., Jubari Sykes, another Theta Chi member, called to tell him that the fraternity's vice president, Peter Munro, had just been caught stealing a digital camera and a laptop from the neighboring Delta Psi Delta fraternity house. Mr. Munro, who was drunk at the time of the incident, had brought along a pledging member to assist in his prank.

Mr. Samples learned that the pledge was missing, the police were everywhere, and Mr. Munro was behind bars. Mr. Samples says that as he walked over to meet Mr. Sykes early that morning, he felt "betrayed and ticked off" by Mr. Munro. He realized Theta Chi had "hit rock bottom." He also knew what needed to be done.

He pulled Mr. Sykes aside and said, "Pete's out, and we should go alcohol free." Mr. Samples recalls that Mr. Sykes "just kind of stepped back and said, 'What?'"

Following a spate of alcohol-related deaths at fraternities across the country this fall, many fraternity leaders are in a predicament similar to the one Mr. Samples faced last year. Their members have reputations for being drunken troublemakers, and they have squandered the good will of administrators and local police. Many of their chapters are on the brink of extinction.

Some have already folded. This month, for instance, Sigma Nu closed its chapter at the University of Oregon despite the recent efforts of some members to overcome the house's persistent problems, which included alcohol violations and legal battles with the university. This fall, two fraternities at universities in Colorado have been closed indefinitely following alcohol-related deaths at their houses, and many other chapters across the country are under pressure from police and administrators to shape up or shut down.

According to experts on Greek life, most fraternities in such a predicament fail to make the improvements necessary to survive. "Complete cultural change is quite difficult," says Dan Bureau, president of the Association of Fraternity Advisors, a group that provides guidance on handling Greek-life issues to its membership of more than 1,300 college professionals. "For a fraternity to succeed in going from one end of the spectrum to another, they usually have to close down and then reopen after some time."

McMinnville police had already declared Theta Chi a "public nuisance" before the Halloween incident and were ready to board up the fraternity's house, which is located off the campus. Administrators at this 2,500-student liberal-arts college had put the chapter on probation, forbidding the then-40-member fraternity from holding any social functions until it could prove that it had cleaned up its act.

Saddled with that baggage, Mr. Samples defied expectations. Over the next four months, he and other house leaders kicked out six members, put an end to Theta Chi's epic beer bashes, and doubled their recruitment. In July, McMinnville's police chief awarded Mr. Samples -- who had stepped down as the fraternity's president in June -- the citizen's police medal for his efforts.

Barry Tucker, director of multicultural programs at Linfield, admits that he thought the Theta Chi brothers were too irresponsible to save their fraternity. "They proved me wrong," Mr. Tucker says. "Justin was very persistent. He doesn't back down for anybody."

Theta Chi's self-styled makeover is the type of swift turnaround that many colleges would love to inspire in their own Greek systems. At a time when many administrators are trying every rule and sanction imaginable to force troubled fraternities to improve, the story of one house's revival shows that sometimes the only way to save a fraternity is for the students to do it from within.

### **#1: Be Persuasive, Not Preachy**

Banning alcohol was a tough sell to many members of Theta Chi who considered the fraternity their "drinking club," according to Mr. Sykes. Because so many of the upperclassmen were staunchly opposed to going dry, Mr. Samples took a low-key approach to promoting the ban. He also did some politicking among the younger members, telling them about his idea and then asking, "What do you think of it?"

When all of Theta Chi's 40 members gathered to vote on the ban last November, Mr. Samples told them that every problem they had as a fraternity stemmed from alcohol. He urged them to vote in favor of banning booze in the house. Although the law in Oregon, like all states, forbids anyone under 21 from drinking alcoholic beverages, drinking behind closed doors is hard to prevent at many institutions.

"You can't sell it as 'Hey! This is awesome!'" says Mr. Samples. "So I tried to go for shock value, saying, 'Just think how far the chief's jaw will drop when I tell him we're going dry.'"

Theta Chi bylaws require a two-thirds majority to pass any rule, and when the members first voted, the measure failed. Fraternity bylaws forbid a second vote in the same meeting, so Mr. Samples adjourned the gathering.

Mr. Samples says he was "livid," but he kept his cool, calmly expressing his disappointment. He asked members to reconsider. He commenced a new meeting five minutes later. This time, the measure passed by one vote.

Despite the stress of the ordeal, the challenge of changing his brothers' minds intrigued him. "Something about seeing what makes people tick fascinates me," says Mr. Samples, a senior majoring in business. "I really like to rally people together and see what I can do to get the best out of them."

With a trim, muscular build and well-defined jaw, Mr. Samples looks the part of a lifelong athlete, and says sports have given him leadership opportunities since his grade-school days as captain of the flag- football team.

Ryan Monagle, now a junior in charge of rush recruitment, says he and other members were motivated by Mr. Samples's determination, and his willingness to do everything possible to improve Theta Chi, including quitting the football team at the beginning of that semester to devote more time to the fraternity. "It's really hard to not help out and back him up when you see him there on his hands and knees scrubbing floors," says Mr. Monagle.

## **#2: Redefine Loyalty**

As difficult as it was to persuade members to approve the alcohol ban, the real hurdle was enforcing it. Not surprisingly, the Theta Chi members who had opposed the ban were the same ones who were getting into the alcohol-related trouble. They refused to change their behavior.

"Things ended up escalating in the house," says Mr. Samples. "There was a certain faction of brothers who said 'screw this' and were basically giving the finger to the police."

Kicking out the disruptive members was not an easy decision for any member. Ultimately, Mr. Monagle says, they had no choice but to remove the disruptive members, whom he refers to as a "cancer." Still, he says he felt "kind of like I was stabbing them in the back."

The principles of loyalty and brotherhood are a double-edged sword: They can either inspire a fraternity to improve or precipitate its downfall. The problem with organizations that foment such strong bonds among members is that they sometimes defend one another even when it contradicts the best interest of the group.

"They're young kids and maybe it's the first time they've felt like a part of something," says Carl Swanson, the Greek adviser to Linfield's four fraternities and four sororities. "A lot of them want to belong and don't want to be the first to say something, even if they think what others in the group are doing is wrong."

The tide of peer pressure, however, is reversible. In Theta Chi's case, Mr. Samples and members of the fraternity's executive council held separate votes on each problematic member, six in all. "With the first person we suspended, the vote was a lot closer than it should have been," says Mr. Samples. "But then, with each subsequent member, it got cumulatively less close."

Amid what members describe as a "civil war," they trusted Mr. Samples's leadership. Mr. Monagle, who is still good friends with some of the former members, says they were "not bad people, just good guys who made some bad decisions."

One of the students they voted out was Mr. Munro, who had stolen the electronics equipment on Halloween night. Although he insists that he left voluntarily, and remains on good terms with many of his friends in Theta Chi, he still faults members of the fraternity for their lack of loyalty.

"With brotherhood, the bottom line is you don't sell out your brothers, no matter the cost," says Mr. Munro. He calls the theft "a prank that got out of control." Theta Chi members, he says, "made me look like I was a horrible person, and made me the scapegoat for all the house's problems."

A month after getting arrested, Mr. Munro says he withdrew from Linfield in an effort to stop drinking. (He says he now does so only occasionally.) And some members took his move as a wake-up call. Without the convenience of free-flowing beer in the house, they did not imbibe nearly as often.

### **#3: Make Friends With the Police**

One of Linfield's top administrators says Greek students on the campus often think everyone is out to get them. Local police officers complain that students "act like they're their own lawyers," arguing about their legal rights instead of taking responsibility for their actions, says Wayne McFarlin, McMinnville's chief of police.

Yet Mr. Samples sought to build an alliance with the authority figures many students considered their enemies.

He admits that the specter of sanctions from the police and college "forced us to deal with problems in a very abrupt fashion, a lot faster than I would have liked."

Instead of rebelling against authority, however, Mr. Samples set up weekly meetings with Linfield's student-life adviser, the Greek-life adviser, and his fraternity's faculty adviser. He asked many former Theta Chi leaders and alumni advisers for advice, and consulted with the executive director of Theta Chi's national office, David Westol, in a series of telephone conversations during the reorganization.

He also met with Chief McFarlin at least once a month.

He even followed Chief McFarlin's suggestion to erect a fence bordering Theta Chi's property, to keep inebriated students from wandering into the fraternity's yard. His openness to such ideas pleasantly surprised Chief McFarlin, and it played a large role in earning Mr. Samples the citizen's police medal.

"His leadership was something I really wanted to capture," says Chief McFarlin. "He took a lot of personal risks. Nobody, not even police chiefs want to do something that makes people upset with them, but he understood that sometimes the mission takes precedence over personal feelings."

#### **#4: Change Your Image**

The most demoralizing effect of Theta Chi's problems was the treatment its members received on the campus and around town. Wearing Theta Chi letters, they say, was like having "Kick Me" signs on their backs. Mr. Samples recalls walking into a 7-Eleven in his Theta Chi shirt, which prompted the clerk to remark, "You guys are in a lot of trouble, huh?"

Both the campus and local newspapers had reported all of the fraternity's misdeeds. So Mr. Samples started off his fraternity's image makeover by writing a letter to the student newspaper, *The Linfield Review*, in which he apologized for Theta Chi's behavior and explained what its members were doing to improve.

Mr. Samples also helped pass a new rule that required every Theta Chi member to increase his community-service commitment from 4 hours to 10 hours per semester. That paid off with some good press: Local newspapers published articles about Theta Chi members volunteering at local tutoring programs and co-sponsoring a Toys for Tots drive with the McMinnville Fire Department.

Recognizing that a handful of bad apples can spoil an entire house's image, Mr. Samples and other members of the fraternity examined their recruitment practices and decided to become more selective. "We paid for the recruitment mistakes of other classes," says Mr. Samples, "because the emphasis was on getting large numbers of people instead of focusing on quality members."

That approach is often a result of financial pressures -- without enough members, expenses, including hefty mortgages and party costs, can become prohibitive. Sometimes that means that house leaders do not carefully consider how dedicated each student will be to their organization.

But instead of hurting its popularity, Theta Chi's new membership requirements, including a minimum 3.0 grade-point average for new members -- based on high-school grades for freshmen -- and demonstrated leadership skills, increased interest among prospective members, attracting the largest pledge class ever the following fall, with 22 members compared with an average of 6 for each of the previous four years.

The image overhaul has changed perceptions of the house on the campus. "They used to be bad, but are getting better," says one Linfield student of the fraternity.

Administrators at Linfield are impressed by Theta Chi's progress, though they qualify their praise by noting that the fraternity has plenty of room for improvement. Under Linfield's new Greek Standards Program, fraternities are assigned points in four categories: academic performance, financial responsibility, community service, and member education. Theta Chi, like all the college's fraternities, falls short of the minimum requirements, meaning it cannot hold more than two social events per semester. The Theta Chi house will also retain its status as a "public nuisance" unless no complaints are filed with the police until next August, according to Chief McFarlin.

As of late November, Theta Chi had only one noise complaint for the whole semester.

"They are doing a really nice job managing their property," says Chief McFarlin, who was so impressed by the improvement that he sent a letter to Linfield College's president in early November commending Theta Chi -- and other Linfield fraternities -- for their progress.

Mr. Samples says he does not mind if his brothers drink -- as long as it's not in the house. Even though he is no longer Theta Chi's president, he still patrols the halls of the fraternity house at 2 or 3 a.m. on weekends, to make sure residents are following the rules.

Despite his diligence, his brothers sometimes break the rules. On a recent Friday afternoon, for instance, a 24-pack of Busch beer and unopened bottle of Bacardi rum sit on top of the mini-fridge in one member's room. Upon hearing about it, Mr. Samples shakes his head. But he is not surprised.

"It makes me mad," he says. "But going dry is an ongoing process, and we have to remind everyone each week that we are still an alcohol-free house."

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