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National

At Penn State, one woman's rule at fraternity parties: Don't go upstairs

By **Danielle Paquette** March 24

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — When Bridget Winch went to parties at Kappa Delta Rho, she observed one rule: Never go upstairs.

The petite Penn State sophomore, an engineering major with daisies painted on her fingernails, said men at the stone mansion culled guests at the door, admitting mostly women. Inside, she and others said, the brothers plied female guests with bottomless cups of Natural Light while a DJ blasted pop hits in the beer-soaked basement.

And at a rager last fall, Winch said, several KDR brothers sidled up as she danced under the strobe lights and asked: Want to go upstairs?

“All of the scary things at frats seem to happen upstairs,” said Winch, 19, who said she deflected their advances by retiring to the bathroom. “They only want you there for one reason.”

Last week, Winch said, her fears were confirmed: Police had discovered a private KDR Facebook page featuring photos of women, some of them naked and unconscious. In the wake of the Jerry Sandusky scandal, in which Penn State leaders allegedly looked the other way while the longtime assistant football coach sexually abused local children, students across campus are demanding zero tolerance: Those responsible should be expelled, they say, and the entire Greek system should be investigated, perhaps dismantled. On Monday, Pennsylvania State University President Eric Barron announced that he will assemble a task force to review the fraternity and sorority system at the university.

“This absolutely isn’t an isolated incident,” said Marina Burka, 22, a senior who said she swore off frat parties after a brother tending bar at a different house “looked at my chest and pulled down his shirt” — a sign to show more cleavage.

“It’s never just one frat,” Burka said. “It’s an entire culture that allows this to happen.”

The allegations are part of a rash of sexist and racist behavior recently uncovered at frats across the nation. At Penn State, the extent of the misconduct remains unclear. Police say they have photos of 20 women in various stages of undress, but so far they are considering only misdemeanor charges of harassment and invasion of privacy.

“At this point, there’s no indication that anyone depicted in any of these photos was sexually assaulted,” said Lt. Keith Robb of the State College police. “Obviously, if we interview someone who said differently, we would focus on that. But right now, no one we’ve spoken to has said that.”

Still, Kappa Delta Rho’s national leaders have suspended their State College chapter — one of at least five frat-house suspensions this month alone. At the University of Oklahoma, Sigma Alpha Epsilon [was shuttered two weeks ago](#) after members were caught on video singing about lynching. Last week, a Pi Kappa Alpha pledge [was found dead](#) at the University of South Carolina; the cause of death is pending toxicology test results. And at North Carolina State University, two frat houses [were closed last week](#), one after a notebook filled with sexually violent statements — “If she’s hot enough, she doesn’t need a pulse” — was found at a local restaurant.

The headlines don’t surprise some experts on Greek life. Unsavory behavior has persisted for years, said University of Kentucky professor Alan D. DeSantis, a longtime fraternity adviser and author of the 2007 book [“Inside Greek U.”](#) With the rise of social media, however, secrets are harder to keep.

“The only difference now is phones,” DeSantis said. “These elite organizations have long been criticized for being outdated, stuck in a sexist and racist time. That’s unfortunately by design.”

The fraternity selection process inhibits diversity and promotes dangerous groupthink, DeSantis said. With sophomores typically holding top management positions and fishing for members among impressionable freshmen, he said, “there’s never going to be a contrarian. There’s never going to be someone to stand up and say, ‘We probably shouldn’t do this.’ ”

Pete Smithhisler, president of the North-American Interfraternity Conference, disagreed, arguing that most of the United States and Canada’s roughly 400,000 fraternity members are upstanding community leaders. The reputation of the Greek system is being damaged, he said, by a few alarming “inconsistencies.”

Last spring, Smithhisler commissioned research on sexual assault and binge drinking — problems that are prevalent at American universities in general, he said, and “not isolated to the fraternity experience.”

Laurel Petrulionis, 22, a Penn State senior, agreed. She said she experiences more harassment walking around campus than she does on frat row.

“The Greek system is an easy scapegoat,” Petrulionis said. “Getting rid of fraternities wouldn’t fix things. The real problem is a lack of awareness and a lack of dialogue around sexual assault in general.”

Other students said fraternities dominate the local party scene and often try to dominate their guests as well.

“There’s a sense of subordination to the fraternities. They have so much power here on campus,” said Sam Cummins, 18, a freshman studying economics. Earlier this year, Cummins said, he was initially barred entry to one fraternity when he showed up to retrieve a drunken female friend. One of the frat’s members, Cummins said, urged him to let the girl “pass out here.”

The risks inherent in passing out at a fraternity house became apparent on KDR’s invitation-only Facebook pages, which were accessible to 144 members and alumni. The original page, dubbed “Covert Business Transactions,” was shut down after a female house guest spotted a topless photo of herself on a computer that was logged on to Facebook, police said.

Eight months ago, that site was replaced by “2.0,” which featured images related to hazing and drug deals, police said. They also found photos of female students unconscious in frat-house bedrooms, a shot of a girl vomiting in the house, and snapshots of a nude Penn State cheerleader and of “strippers hired by the fraternity.”

“Some of the postings were of nude females that appeared to be . . . passed out or in other sexual or embarrassing positions,” wrote Chris Weaver, a State College police detective, in a probable-cause affidavit filed in January.

Police said they were tipped to the Web site by James Vivenzio, a former KDR member who no longer attends Penn State, according to university officials. Vivenzio, a Great Falls, Va., native, has since been hailed as a hero by women’s groups.

Anne Ard, executive director of the Centre County Women’s Resource Center, praised Vivenzio’s “courage” at a rally Friday outside the university’s administrative offices. And one of the rally’s organizers, journalism major Lauren Lewis, 20, lauded Vivenzio for “break[ing] away from that mob mentality and be[ing] a human being first.”

Court records show that Vivenzio was arrested twice in the past two years after tangling with law enforcement officers, once in Fairfax County and once in State College. The latest incident occurred on campus in August, when police reported spotting Vivenzio drinking beer in public; he was charged with fleeing police and resisting arrest.

The Fairfax County charges were dropped; Vivenzio's family said he was ultimately charged with a driving infraction. But charges were still pending in State College when Vivenzio offered police information about the KDR Facebook page.

Neither Vivenzio nor his attorney, Elizabeth Hunt, responded to multiple phone calls and messages. Kappa Delta Rho members and their leaders also declined to comment publicly.

"Our son did the right thing here and voluntarily reported abhorrent and dangerous criminal activity to the authorities," Vivenzio's parents said a statement Monday to the Washington Post.

The statement blamed "severe and inhumane hazing" by "the KDR fraternity" for Vivenzio's recent problems with the law, adding: "We pray for his safety and his complete recovery from this ordeal, as well as for all of the students and victims that were so severely impacted by the actions of this and other fraternities."

Last week at Penn State, Barron proclaimed himself "shocked and angered" by the Facebook page, saying in a statement that KDR demonstrated an "apparent disregard for not only the law, but also human dignity."

But some students, recalling the Sandusky scandal, expressed frustration with the school's early reaction. As snow fell Friday, students rallying outside Barron's office chanted "No more!" while more than 100 protesters signed a petition to bar the accused fraternity brothers from attending classes while the investigation is pending.

"When you tell me that you are shocked, what I hear is that you aren't listening," Kathryn Rose Falvo, a graduate student in women's studies who counsels sexual-assault victims, declared into a microphone, addressing Barron and other university leaders. "You have no excuse not to be familiar with these issues. . . . Perhaps you are merely shocked at the stupidity of men who got caught."

Across campus at Kappa Delta Rho, someone had spray-painted "TEAR IT DOWN" on the antique brick fence. Winch, the engineering sophomore, wandered by and studied the empty lawn.

"I'm never going back," she said. "I mean, are photos of me on that Facebook page?"

Winch said she never passed out at KDR, and she certainly never went upstairs. But she recalls dancing without a

care — or concern that men with cameras might be lurking in the dark.

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