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THE PROBLEM IS...HUMANS

Pretty safe statement to say that Covid has changed the world... and in the little corner of the world located at 22 S. Campus, the changes have been challenging to say the least.

Fraternities, like most organizations, are all about relationships. Imagine trying to decide where you want to live next school year when not being “allowed” to visit. Try to build a strong, cohesive group of 34 young men when you are not allowed to have more than 8 together at a time. To meet your new Brothers, you are assigned to meet 15 members of the larger group per week... but your time and access to them is limited. And imagine working towards these goals while your college experience has gone from crowded classrooms to isolated screen shots.

Fortunately, young men are adaptable and able to see the goals through the obstacles. I have to say that our guys persevered and we initiated a strong new class of good members. We were fortunate to have technology to assist... and one of the best things we did was to initiate weekly Zoom calls with different Alumni to share their experiences in the House and the effect that Alpha Delta Phi has had in their lives. Those sessions were so good that we have decided to continue them and open them up to all Alumni and undergrads... like I said... adaptable!

At our initiation ceremony, I represented the Alumni and talked about how their “pledge” process (I know... archaic term, but I am old!) was unique. But reflecting on it, every group in the history of the House has been unique in its own way. For example, I was a Spring Pledge when Miami was on quarters instead of semesters... I completed my membership process while I was actually living in the House! Now THAT was unique!

I also talked about several of the similarities, from the traditions to learning the history to appreciating the physical structure. But the most interesting similarity was hope. Each class represents hope for a better brotherhood, for the continuation of both the place and the organization. So I talked to them about my hopes for them.

I hoped that they appreciated the process of getting to know the Brothers through their interviews and having the opportunity to build relationships that could last their whole lives.

I hoped they had learned to appreciate this special place which has been “home” for so many young men just like them... and that they would make a commitment to take good care of it.

I hoped they appreciated the history, the traditions, and the goals of an organization that started 189 years ago as a Literary Society.

I hoped they got to know their pledge Brothers and that they learned a lot about themselves in the process... and that they also learned a lot about human nature as they watched the process unfold.

But most of all... I hoped that they would do their best to build a better Brotherhood. When some of them interviewed me they asked about what advice I would offer them. I closed my comments with the perspective of a Brother who is closer to the end than they are to the beginning of what is a remarkably short life. Give your all to whatever you do! No “half-stepping” ... do your best at your studies, your relationships, your work and this Brotherhood. If you do that, you’ll have no regrets.

I was reflecting on this experience after I had a conversation with my good friend John, aka Juan (his nickname). John is one of the best humans I know. He has strong convictions and he lives them. He is one of a handful of people I would describe as a “brother from another mother”. John is the kind of person I would hope every one of these new initiates becomes.

Our conversation started (as usual) all about music, an online concert by Todd Rundgren we were both going to attend and our shared passion for the music of John McCutcheon. Somehow the subject of fraternities came up and John shared “I don’t believe in Fraternities. When I was at BG I was part of a group that fought against a frat that wanted to take over the best dorm on campus and we stopped them. They were abusing their power and I was glad to fight them.” (Apologies, Juan... this is not a perfect quote.)

In response to that and another part of our discussion I told John that there were a number of things that we would never agree on and I appreciated our ability to have those differences and remain friends. But his comment and my experience at the House got me thinking about how people perceive Fraternities. There are certainly enough stories about abuses... you’ll see every incident of hazing or alcohol usage before you will see any stories about positive relationships, philanthropy or service.

But when it comes right down to it, Fraternities are no better or any worse than any other human organization. You know what the problem is with all human organizations? HUMANS! Just about any group you can think of starts out with a positive purpose of enlightened self-interest... whether it’s public service, profit, entertainment, medicine, invention or political change, everyone sees themselves as being the good guys, wearing the “white hat”... even Al Quaida sees itself as virtuous.

Like all organizations, Fraternities start with hopes and goals and are made up of “like-minded” people and by definition, all organizations “exclude” somebody. They are not inherently good or evil, they are just a group of people who want to build relationships through shared experiences. So the difference is in actions... and it was then I realized I should have closed my speech to the initiates with an old saying I first saw on a graffiti wall at OU when I was 17 years old... “What you do speaks so loudly I cannot hear a word you say.”

Thank you, John... as always you make me think! And thank you Alpha Delta Phi for giving me the opportunity to see these young men adapt and try and grow and fail and try again.

Addendum: Between starting and sending this edition, the tragic event at Bowling Green occurred. I felt the need to “check” myself, so I sent a draft to several members of our Alumni Council. I got this thoughtful response from Doug Diefenbach and thought it appropriate to include.

It's always struck me that fraternities are a little different from other organizations in this way: by virtue of the fact they are a very cohesive and powerful culture, they take that "human nature" that you talk about (or the 19 year old version of it) and aggregate, concentrate and amplify whatever human virtues and failings are present in the group. In a fraternity environment where bad behavior is permitted or even encouraged by peers, even guys who are mild-mannered may do their share of problem-causing (drinking, destruction, disrespecting women, and hazing). I suspect the seeds of those things are present in every 19 year-old... but potential is not the same thing as destiny. If, instead, the environment and expectations can be kept positive, then the peer-influenced growth and maturity in a fraternity can be life-changing in ways no other organization can match.

Thanks Doug... good statement about what I hope is my mission here.