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## USU Greek organizations charged with hazing

Pledge death » Also 12 members charged in alcohol poisoning of Salt Lake teen Michael Starks

By Brian Maffly  
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Cache County prosecutors on Friday filed felony hazing charges against two Utah State University Greek-letter societies and misdemeanor charges against 12 of their members in connection with the alcohol-poisoning death of an 18-year-old pledge.

Michael Starks, a freshman from Salt Lake City, was participating in initiation-week activities when he drank a lethal amount of whiskey in the company of Sigma Nu fraternity and Chi Omega sorority members, according to charges filed in Logan's First District Court. Paramedics found Starks unresponsive at the Sigma Nu fraternity at 3 a.m. Nov. 20. Efforts to revive him were not successful and medical examiners later determined his blood alcohol level reached .34, more than four times the legal limit for driving.

Charging documents indicate Starks was not forced to drink as a prerequisite for joining the fraternity, but Utah's hazing statute allows for conviction even if the victim consented to the abuse, as long he or she is younger than 21. The case shows how hard liquor can be deadly to an inexperienced drinker like Starks, indicating the dangers of even friendly hazing, said prosecutor Tony Baird.

"If you beat someone with paddle, make them a slave for a week, that's hazing. There is no coercion in this case at all," Baird said. "This is where you have a fraternity that coordinates a capture activity. It's a have-fun kind of thing. The guys really look forward to it. They want to be the one chosen."

Utah's hazing statute criminalizing behavior that "endangers the mental or physical health or safety of another...for the purpose of initiation, admission into, affiliation with, holding office in, or as a condition of continued membership in any organization." Hazing is considered a misdemeanor absent aggravating circumstances and the law specifically references consumption of liquor. Although hazing becomes a felony a third-degree felony when the hazing results in serious bodily harm, only the organizations are targeted with felonies.

**The students face a year in jail if convicted, while punishment for the organizations was unclear.** Were they people, conviction could result in a prison term of up to five years.

The night before Starks died, Sigma Nu members selected him and another student, who is 22, as their top choices among the 16 young men who pledged last fall. As a reward, the desired pledges were "kidnapped" by Chi Omega women, whose sorority house neighbors Sigma Nu's. The group went to the off-campus home of a Sigma Nu brother. The pledges were stripped to their boxers and painted Aggie blue. A 19-year-old Chi Omega member supplied a bottle of whiskey for the pledges to drink, according to charging documents.

Participating in this fraternity initiation rite was required for the Chi Omega sorority pledges, according to Starks' older brother George, whose family was briefed by prosecutors on Wednesday. "One of the girls was uncomfortable with what was going on and left, and another one was pressured to stay," George Starks said Friday.

USU officials have already suspended the Sigma Nu and Chi Omega chapters as campus organizations, and the chapters' national offices have likewise suspended them, pending the outcome of investigations.

Both organizations publicly maintain zero-tolerance positions toward hazing and alcohol abuse, and Sigma Nu has co-sponsored research into the cultural phenomenon of hazing and ways to eliminate it. This 250-chapter fraternity was founded in 1868 at Virginia Military Institute in direct opposition to the physical harassment that young officers endured at the hands of their older colleagues, according to Sigma Nu executive director Brad Beacham. He reserved comment on the Starks case until he read the charges.

"We certainly respect law enforcement's choice to pursue the criminal charges they feel are warranted and appropriate," Beacham said. "We will take into account any and all new information as it becomes available."

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