



MICHIGAN STATE CHAPTER

CONFRONTS

HAZING

When visiting Sigs notice things are not right with Michigan State's I-week and performance of the Ritual, Fraternity leaders act swiftly with then-Consul Blair Montgomery, MICHIGAN STATE 2015, to make a change.

Story by Susan Lorimor Photos by Kevin Fowler



When Blair Montgomery, **MICHIGAN STATE 2015**, was a new initiate, some of his pledge brothers

avoided the chapter house for a couple of weeks after Initiation. They did not want to be around the older members who had hazed them.

Even when they eventually came around the house, they carried with them a deep resentment that would spill onto a new class of recruits in the months to come.

“[The new initiates] would have a sense of entitlement and would turn around and do the same thing [to the incoming pledges],” says Montgomery, who was Consul during the 2012 to 2013 academic year.

The hazing had become a cycle, as it had been for years. It was such a part of the chapter’s culture that it was accepted behavior until May 2013, when a Sig from a visiting chapter reported what he believed were departures from the General Fraternity’s prescribed activities for the days leading up to Initiation, known as I-week, and the latter ceremony.

The visiting Sig’s concerns led International Fraternity leaders to confront Montgomery, who admitted the hazing and joined forces with them and his chapter advisors to begin to change the chapter’s culture.

For Montgomery and others, what followed was a period of self-reflection as to why and how the hazing had continued.

“Everyone went through things [as recruits] and they accepted it,” says Montgomery of the hazing they had tolerated.

SLOW EVOLUTION AND A SUDDEN HALT

In spring 2013, Montgomery’s chapter held I-week, when pledges are to mentally prepare to take the oath of upholding the Fraternity’s values of friendship, justice and learning. The Sig from another chapter, who is not named due to the sensitivity of the matter, had joined Michigan State in the events because he

was unable to go through them at his chapter, due to timing.

Others from his chapter saw things that they believed were not right and reported them to their local alumni. Word got to West Michigan province Grand Praetor Chris Nyers, **WESTERN MICHIGAN 1989**, who called Montgomery on Mother’s Day 2013 to discuss the situation.

“I told him things did happen,” says Montgomery.

Montgomery says that he was caught off guard because he thought that if the Consul from the visiting chapter had concerns about the events, that he would have contacted him privately.

Regardless, what the Michigan State Sigs did was send the pledges through their local traditions, which deviated from the Fraternity’s prescribed I-week activities, and from the proper Ritual investiture. The pledges were treated differently than were the active members, as if their Initiation was conditional, based upon the recruits’ actions.

“It had gotten 1 percent worse each year until it had gotten out of control,” says Assistant Chapter Advisor Rich Nemesi, **1981**, who earned career success by turning around a struggling company and became re-engaged with the chapter as it faced trouble.

DEALING WITH THE AFTERMATH

After Nyers called Montgomery about the hazing in May 2013, Montgomery emailed his chapter brothers to say, “things have come to my attention from Headquarters and we could go through a membership review.”

The message caused a mix of reactions. “The first brother [I heard from] thought it was a plot of mine to keep who I wanted [in the chapter] and kick out the others,” Montgomery says.

By now, the chapter had been split into what he called an “A” team and a “B” team of members that bickered constantly, while the A team held chapter offices and essentially ran the organization. The two factions were polar opposites, Montgomery says.

“We’d have fights on Facebook,”

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Opposite: Immediate past Michigan State Consul Blair Montgomery, **2015**, in green shirt, poses in front of the chapter house on Aug. 21, 2014. He was Consul when a Sig from another chapter discovered that hazing was taking place at Michigan State. As a result, Fraternity leaders confronted Montgomery, who seemed to welcome the support to eradicate the practices from his chapter. Montgomery asked for a membership review to begin to change the group’s culture, along with the help of his chapter advisors. Also integral was then-Kustos Chris Flanagan, **2015**, who helped to ensure that the chapter utilize the General Fraternity’s prescribed methods for the performance of the Ritual. Flanagan is now Consul of the chapter. From left are Assistant Chapter Advisor Rich Nemesi, **1981**; Montgomery; Flanagan, **2015**; and Chapter Advisor Dave Sbraccia, **1999**.

WHAT IF YOUR CHAPTER HAZES?

If your chapter hazes, you may not believe it is a problem, or you may feel that it is and you may think you are the only person who does. Here's what to do:

REALIZE THE IMPLICATIONS

A lawsuit that could result from alleged hazing activities could financially devastate you or your family. It could also lead to a lack of alumni support and your group's suspension or loss of its charter. Additionally, being known as someone who hazed or associated with a chapter that does so can harm your future employment or graduate school applications.

UNITE WITH OTHERS

If you believe certain actions should be stopped, raise your concerns to other members you trust. Form an informal subgroup of those who would be willing to voice their objections to chapter leaders and the larger group.

TAKE A STAND

Tell others that you do not believe that recruits should have to go through what you did.

OFFER NEW WAYS TO CREATE GROUP COHESION

Often, people say that hazing bonds members, so in order to offer an alternative to the activities, suggest other ways to create a sense of solidarity. Try having initiated brothers and recruits work together on a community service or home improvement project.

Source: hazing.cornell.edu.

Montgomery says of the almost daily battles among members. "People were breaking things in the house and not paying for [the damage]. People were not paying dues. Chapter meetings and E-board meetings were atrocious. We didn't really have a judicial board."

After Montgomery sent the message about the potential review, not only did he feel the anger that was directed toward him, but he heard concerns from brothers who were worried that the chapter would

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get kicked off of campus. In the midst of it all, Montgomery kept the identity of the reporting chapter quiet, so as to protect its members.

In August 2013, Montgomery and the chapter's Balfour Leadership Training Workshop (LTW) representatives, along with Nemesi and chapter advisor Dave Sbraccia, **MICHIGAN STATE 1999**, met with 68th Grand Consul Mike Greenberg, **ILLINOIS WESLEYAN 1982**, Grand Pro Consul Mike Ursillo, **BROWN 1978**, and the team that would later conduct the membership review.

Montgomery says that it was a challenge to prepare for the meeting, but since he had spent a good part of the summer facing his chapter's problems, he seemed to have resolve about how he would approach it.

"I knew what we did and didn't do," says Montgomery, who ultimately asked for the membership review. "I told myself that I would be the one [from my chapter] to embrace the change."

He says that prior to the call from Nyers months earlier, he knew that the chapter was in trouble, but he didn't know what to do. The visiting chapter's concerns helped prompt the change, ensuring

that Montgomery, with the help of his advisors and other Fraternity leaders, was empowered to work toward a solution.

Regardless, Montgomery says that after the meeting at Balfour LTW, the mood between himself and the newly initiated members who had joined him as his chapter's representatives had changed. "They couldn't look at me for the rest of [the] workshop," he says. "I think they were in shock about things."

REBUILDING THE CHAPTER

Following the meeting, it was determined that the membership review would take place in the fall. Montgomery relied upon Sbraccia and Nemesi for strength, because in the aftermath of the initial news that a review could take place, only about three of Montgomery's pledge brothers remained his support system. Others were angry or distanced themselves from him.

Sbraccia, who was Consul when the chapter underwent a membership review in the late 1990s, understood what Montgomery was going through. Years later, the chapter advisor, along with Nemesi, had weekly phone calls over the summer with Montgomery to discuss how they would change the chapter's culture.

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When it came time for the membership review, 24 brothers voluntarily left active involvement with the organization, opting for special alumni status. The status meant they could no longer have contact with the remaining undergraduates.

The membership review team then individually interviewed all 68 of the remaining undergraduates. The team recommended six additional students also enter special alumni status. Sixty-two members ultimately remained part of the active chapter. They then began the slow process of rebuilding the local organization.



Above: Former Michigan State Consul Blair Montgomery, 2015, gathers with chapter brothers on Aug. 21, 2014, in the parking lot of the Fraternity house. He led the chapter during the 2013 to 2014 academic year, when he and other leaders called for an end to hazing. Montgomery is now Interfraternity Council president at Michigan State.

The membership review team laid out stipulations to which the brothers had to adhere, including use of a revamped pledge program, a model I-week and the proper Ritual investiture, as well as a restructuring of chapter operations.

Headquarters Director of Chapter Support Matt Pagan, **NORTH FLORIDA 2010**, was present for two I-weeks and Initiations that followed, to ensure that all were conducted properly.

Montgomery says that some of his best friends finally came around and began to put their faith back in him after one of the chapter's Initiations. "After we initiated the fall pledge class and they saw how cool it was [for the new initiates], that was like the selling point," says Montgomery. "People were sort of jealous that we didn't go through that."

Montgomery says that while he wishes he had the courage to speak up about the hazing when he was a pledge, he is glad that years later, the visiting chapter did.

"It was like a blessing in disguise," he says.

Montgomery says chapter morale, the sense of brotherhood and grades have improved, and so has member involvement in chapter events. "It's like night and day," Montgomery says of the change. "I'm really in awe at the turnaround."

The best part?

Montgomery says that after pledges are initiated, they immediately want to hang out at the house.

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