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Student's Death Turns Spotlight on Hazing

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ and ROBBIE BROWN

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Before they even arrive at Florida A&M University here, the freshmen who are hand-picked for the famous marching band know all about the hazing, an unsanctioned tradition that goes back decades.

In the ultracompetitive atmosphere of the Marching 100, as the band is called, the verbal, emotional and physical pain that is doled out is viewed as an extra source of pride and strength among the relatively small number of band members who participate in hazing, former members say.

Punching, paddling, slapping and forcing band members to eat certain things, do certain favors and endure verbal abuse for mistakes is part of the code, carried out by subgroups within each section: “The Clones” in the clarinet cluster, for example, and “The Soulful Saxes” in the saxophone section. Drinking is seldom involved, former members say, and much of the hazing is voluntary.

“A lot of people who come to the band come expecting these things,” said Phillip Stewart, 29, a former university drum major who said hazing was part of a subculture within the band. “They think that in order to be amongst the best and to be accepted they have to do certain things. This isn’t true.”

But those decades of tradition — a longtime concern of the university administration — are now the focal point of an investigation into the death of a drum major 10 days ago, and the reaction so far has been significant.

The band’s longtime director, Julian White, has been fired, and four separate investigations have been ordered, including one by Gov. Rick Scott, who asked the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to step in, and one by the university president, James H. Ammons. The marching band has been suspended from performing indefinitely.

The death of the drum major, Robert Champion, 26, also raises a perplexing question: Why was a drum major — a campus celebrity whose position reflects outstanding leadership skills and

talent — being hazed, if that is what in fact contributed to his death? No cause of death has yet been determined but the Orange County Sheriff's Office in Orlando, where Mr. Champion died, said it suspected that hazing was involved.

“I vow as the president of FAMU that Robert's death will not be in vain,” Dr. Ammons said Wednesday at Mr. Champion's funeral in Decatur, Ga.

The church was packed with 500 mourners, including many band members and Dr. White, who also spoke at the service. Promising to “end hazing on the campus of FAMU,” Dr. Ammons told mourners that he would introduce his own brand of R & D to the university, “and I don't mean research and development; I mean respect and dignity.”

Mr. Champion, a hard-working clarinet player, tried out twice before being selected as one of six drum majors in the spring of 2010. He died just hours after marching on the field at the Florida Classic, a football game between Florida A&M and its longtime rival, Bethune-Cookman University.

He collapsed in a bus parked at an Orlando hotel, where the band was staying. It was evening, and the buses should have been locked, Dr. White said. After interviewing band members, he said, it appeared that Mr. Champion had been punched repeatedly by a small group of band members on the bus as part of a hazing ritual, then vomited and passed out. When others in the bus could not revive him, they called for an ambulance. He died a short time later at a hospital.

His parents have hired a lawyer and said they planned to sue the university to prevent such a thing from happening again.

“It's kind of a ‘don't ask, don't tell’ culture,” said Christopher M. Chestnut, the family's lawyer. “No one's shocked. Everyone knew it happened.”

Dr. White, a tenured professor who was been at the university for four decades and became band director in 1998, has also hired a lawyer, saying he had done everything he could to stop hazing over the past two decades.

Hazing is not uncommon among marching bands around the country and has been a longtime practice at historically black colleges like Florida A&M. The university, whose enrollment is roughly 13,000, has had its share of serious hazing incidents. Two students were beaten or paddled so forcefully they suffered acute injury, one in 1998 and the other in 2001.

To back his claim of trying to end hazing, Dr. White released documents this week showing letters of band suspensions dating to 2001 that he had issued to dozens of students and correspondence with university administrators and the university police. He also held

workshops for students and meetings with freshmen, created an anonymous reporting system and issued routine admonishments, among other things.

A few weeks before Mr. Champion's death, Dr. White suspended 26 trombonists and clarinetists from the band for hazing in October and November.

Bria Hunter, a clarinetist, was repeatedly punched in the legs so badly this fall that a leg bone was broken and a knee damaged, her parents told WXIA-TV in Atlanta on Tuesday. The Tallahassee Police Department is now investigating her case.

Dr. White sent letters regarding the 26 recent suspensions to university administrators and the university police. Although he was director of the band, he said, he lacked the authority to suspend or expel students from the university or cancel major marching events, the sort of harsher punishment that he said he had sought over the years.

The Marching 100 is the marquee organization at the university — the equivalent of a powerhouse football team — and is crucial in raising money for it and attracting new students. It has performed at events like the [Grammy Awards](#) and the [Super Bowl](#) and was scheduled to play at Carnegie Hall. The band has 375 members this year.

In an interview, Dr. White said of the recent suspensions, "I would have liked the administration to terminate the students," and he added that he had made such a recommendation to the university's vice president, its dean and other officials. "They did not do that," he said. "We need to be stronger in our punishment."

While some say that as band director he should have asserted greater control, others, including Ms. Hunter's parents and former band members, have rallied to Dr. White's defense, saying he was hypervigilant about hazing.

"Dr. White has been trying to champion eradicating hazing from the band for years," said Timothy A. Barber, a former head drum major who graduated in 2003 and is now the executive director for the Black Archives History and Research Foundation of South Florida. "He took a strong stance. But it goes underground. It happens away from campus, at night. You can't control it."

Lizette Alvarez reported from Tallahassee, and Robbie Brown from Decatur, Ga.



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