

Animal House Revisited: Fraternity Fosters Faith

College fraternities don't always have the best reputations. Wild parties, hazing, elitism, substance abuse, gang rapes and more help perpetuate the Animal House image that the film of the same name portrayed. Parents — and many students — might wonder why any sane person ever would want to join.

Though the weaknesses of university Greek-letter societies are often what grab headlines, numerous national fraternities and sororities try hard to change both their image and substance. Believe it or not, many were founded to promote character development and strong cultural values and are seeking to return to their roots.

For example, my own fraternity, Lambda Chi Alpha, has a vision "...to prepare and encourage collegiate men of good character, high ethics, and noble ideals to contribute positively to the world in which they live." Lambda Chi's annual North American Food Drive has raised over 10.5 million pounds of food for the needy since 1993.

The liability crisis is one factor motivating "Greeks" to focus on character. In today's litigious society, a tragic injury or death can prompt lawsuits that could put them out of business. Moderating local behavior helps perpetuate national survival.

But there is more going on here than mere survival. Often top leaders of national Greek organizations are deeply committed citizens who seek to live by and promote the principles their groups espouse.

Many Greek organizations were founded on biblical or quasi-biblical principles. Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) is one of the more prominent fraternities with over 240 active and inactive chapters and over 6,000 undergraduate members. ATO chief executive officer Wynn Smiley told me of his group's convictions.

It seems that ATO was founded in 1865 by a 19-year-old former Confederate soldier who wanted to promote brotherly love as a means of helping to reconcile North and South after the U.S. Civil War. The organization that young Otis Allan Glazebrook founded was not religious but sought to foster reconciliation and brotherhood based on the self-sacrifice and unconditional love demonstrated by Jesus.

Smiley and his colleagues emphasize these roots in their recruitment and educational development. "Jesus made the most radical statements on love," notes Smiley. An example: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...."

Allen Wilson is ATO's Spiritual Leadership Consultant. Most chapters have chaplains and Wilson travels to help encourage spiritual development. ATO even has a devotional book with inspirational articles by alumni and others on practical themes like character, trust, humility, truth, servant leadership and persevering through disappointment.

Smiley readily admits that not every member or chapter exemplifies such values. But he points out that hidden personal hurts — from family illness to depression — plus students' concerns for their

own future, ethical dilemmas and faith raise questions that “brothers practicing brotherly love should help each other explore.” He says that “ATO is committed to talking about issues of faith” and to providing “a loving, trusting environment for brothers to explore, discuss, argue and perhaps even on occasion resolve questions.”

He is onto something significant here. Animal House, meet the competition.