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Ban of Brothers

By BENOIT DENIZET-LEWIS

By modern fraternity standards, Phi Delta Theta's tailgate party was a real rager. For one thing, there were kegs. I couldn't see them just then, but proof of their existence was everywhere. Packed into a backyard near the campus of Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., were some 100 drunken college students, beer spilling from plastic cups, industrial-size ketchup bottles overturned on the grass near the grill and gaggles of hard-drinking sorority girls (including one self-described Phi Delt groupie) keeping pace with the boys.

Amid the revelry, I spotted a lanky, easygoing Phi Delt sophomore from Texas who goes by the nickname Two-Shot, because two shots is about all it takes to get him acting silly. "Two-Shot!" I said loudly as he meandered through the crowd in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans, a beer in one hand and a cheap plastic bottle of vodka in the other. "Where's the keg?"

He pointed toward a far corner. "Hey, homey," he said. "The beer's over there."

"You going to the game?" I asked.

"Man, that's a good question," he said. "I got great intentions, you know. But stuff happens. Sometimes I don't make it."

I wished him luck ("Keep it real!" he replied) and made my way toward the keg, where I bumped into Theo Michels, Phi Delt's likable chapter president, and Greg Bok, a big, sarcastic, deceptively smart sophomore. (Bok looks like a meathead but says he scored a 1,550 out of 1,600 on the SAT.) Both Michels and Bok were marveling at the success of the day's tailgate.

"Six kegs and no cops," Michels said. "This has to be some sort of record. Last year, we had an off-campus party that started at 10:30, and by 11 the police came with a paddy wagon. A paddy wagon. We're college students trying to have a party off campus, because we can't have one in our own fraternity house, because we're not allowed to drink there. So we try to have one off campus, and it gets broken up. Basically, we can't have a party anywhere."

Peter Micali, a square-jawed Phi Delt sophomore who had wandered within earshot, chimed in, "Yeah, it was easier to party in high school."

Bok shook his head sadly. "The good old-fashioned fraternity experience is dead," he said, pausing for dramatic effect. "So long, 'Animal House.' "

It's doom and gloom time for many fraternity boys at Northwestern and at colleges across the country. University administrators, alarmed by the extent of binge drinking on their campuses, are cracking down on the excesses of Greek life, saying it's high time for fraternity boys to shape up and sober up. While all kinds of college students binge drink, the 2001 College Alcohol Study by the Harvard School of Public Health found that fraternity house residents are twice as likely to do so as other students.

Eleven national and international fraternities, including Phi Delta Theta, now require most of their chapter houses to be alcohol-free, no matter what their university's policy is. (Sororities have long banned drinking in their chapter houses.) Take away the booze, the new alcohol-free theory goes, and fraternities will be safer, on more solid economic footing (fewer lawsuits, cheaper liability insurance) and more conducive to the creation of real bonds of brotherhood. Friendships will be forged out of genuine respect, not the shared misery of hazing or the shared fog of drink. "We just didn't see a way to dramatically change the fraternity culture without removing alcohol," said Bob Biggs, executive vice president of Phi Delta Theta, when we met last fall in his office at the fraternity's spotless, museumlike international headquarters in Oxford, Ohio.

But what, exactly, would a dry fraternity look like? And would anyone want to join? You'd have a better chance, I thought, of getting James Carville and Bob Novak to open "Crossfire" with five minutes of meditation. As I listened to the brothers in that backyard go on about life at one of Northwestern's "alcohol free" fraternities, I couldn't help feeling a little sorry for them. I was a Phi Delt at Northwestern in the mid-90's -- not that long ago, to be sure, but seemingly a different time entirely. While we considered ourselves tamer than fraternities at many state schools (where Greek affiliation can often take precedence over just about everything), my brothers and I still saw drunken debauchery in the chapter house as our fraternal mandate. We threw rowdy keg parties. We got drunk in our rooms and then broke into other fraternities, stealing their sacred robes and toaster ovens. Some of us smoked marijuana, which we grew and harvested in an off-campus apartment. And many of us eagerly participated in drunken hazing, which most of the hazers and hazed saw as a kind of comic relief integral to fraternal bonding. To my brothers and me, a dry fraternity would have been inconceivable.

In less than a decade, though, the inconceivable has happened. When I told a friend from college that his fraternity, Theta Chi, was now dry, he was baffled. "What's the point?" he wanted to know. Indeed, what is the point of a fraternity if you can't give a party -- or drink a beer in your room with a brother and watch "Cops" at 3 a.m.? Wasn't alcohol what enabled fraternity boys to be, well, fraternity boys?

When I first heard of the move to ban alcohol from fraternity houses, I was reminded of a scene in the film "Roger Dodger," when a 16-year-old boy sneaks into a bar with his uncle, who promises to teach him the fine and complicated art of picking up women. When the boy declines an alcoholic beverage, the uncle becomes apoplectic. "You drink that drink!" he demands. "Alcohol has been a social lubricant for thousands of years. What do you think, you're going to sit here tonight and reinvent the wheel?"

A number of fraternities are brazenly trying to do just that, arguing that the fraternity wheel is broken -- and badly in need of a redesign. But what does this new, redesigned American fraternity look like? I was back at Northwestern to find out, and to try to make sense of my own fraternity experience. Had I joined for the drunken keg parties, or was brotherhood about more than that? And was I really a "frat guy," or an anomaly -- a guy who played sports and wore baseball caps but who really should have been hanging out with fraternity-mocking English majors?

Nearly a decade removed from college, I still view my fraternity experience with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. And I'm not alone. Two fraternity brothers told me that while they loved being Phi Deltas, I was not, under any circumstance, to mention their names in this article. I understood. Never mind that Frank Lloyd Wright, Paul Newman, Walter Cronkite and Ted Koppel -- not to mention nearly half of all U.S. presidents and 40 percent of Supreme Court justices -- belonged to a fraternity in college. The stereotype of the fraternity guy as party-loving imbecile is alive and well: just listen to any rant about President George Bush's lack of intellectual curiosity, where a reference to him being a frat boy is most likely used as indisputable proof.

In that backyard in Evanston, though, surrounded by beer-guzzling fraternity boys and the girls who love them, I didn't feel ashamed. I felt old. "Dude, you're the reporter dude, right?" one brother said, grinning wildly. "Let me introduce you to some freshman girls! You want to meet some freshman girls? You're with Phi Deltas, man. You remember how it is! It's all about the girls!"

Word spread among the brothers that I was a Phi Delt from way back in the 1990's, and before long several cornered me. They wanted answers: "How often did you have keg parties in the house? Was the house packed with girls? Were the girls hotter? How much cooler was it?"

They listened intently as I held court in the backyard, recounting salacious stories of riotous fraternal living -- a little exaggerated in the retelling, of course. But the more I went on about our "huge keg parties," the more pathetic I felt. Was I really trying to impress college students? And were all of my favorite fraternity stories really about getting loaded?

Since 1997, the year I graduated, Northwestern has expelled five fraternities -- in cooperation with their national organizations -- for alcohol and hazing violations. The last casualty was Kappa Sigma, banished

after its 2003 formal dance party at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. In a gaffe almost too dopey to be believed, a Kappa Sigma brother dropped a flask into the aquarium's beluga whale tank. Already on probation for an alcohol-related incident that sent a pledge to the hospital, the fraternity was booted off campus by Northwestern administrators (it can petition to return in 2007), but not before the brothers could make going-away T-shirts. They read, "Kappa Sigma -- a Whale of a Good Time."

Of the 17 fraternities now at Northwestern, 13 are alcohol-free, and any new chapter starting at the school also must be dry. (In 1997, not a single Northwestern fraternity was dry.) Across the country, some 30 colleges -- including the University of Iowa, the University of Oklahoma and the University of Oregon -- have gone even further, banning alcohol in all their fraternity houses. (Some have also made their residence halls alcohol-free.) And many schools are increasingly placing fraternities on probation, requiring that they meet specific academic and behavioral standards. Others are moving fraternity rush from fall to winter, heeding the words of the Arizona Supreme Court, which in 1994 opined that "we are hardpressed to find a setting where the risk of an alcohol-related injury is more likely than from under-age drinking at a university fraternity party the first week of the new college year." To try to combat the tendency of fraternity members to simply move their parties to off-campus apartments and houses, university officials are also cooperating more than ever with the local police.

And then there's Alfred University in Western New York and Santa Clara University in California, which have taken the most drastic step of all: they decided to do away with fraternities altogether. "The Greek system is beyond repair," Robert McComsey, chairman of Alfred's board, told *The New York Times* in May 2002.

Fraternities did little to improve their image this fall, making headlines across the country in hazing and alcohol-related deaths. At Colorado State University, Samantha Spady, a sophomore, was found dead in a lounge at the Sigma Pi chapter house by a member giving his mother a tour of the fraternity. At the University of Oklahoma, Blake Adam Hammontree, a freshman, died at the Sigma Chi house from alcohol poisoning. And at the University of Colorado, Lynn Gordon Bailey Jr., a Chi Psi pledge, was found dead after drinking during an initiation ritual.

Some fraternity leaders point out that drinking-related deaths at fraternity houses make up fewer than a dozen of the 1,400 alcohol-related deaths at colleges each year (car accidents are involved in approximately 1,100 of those). Whatever the numbers, none of those deaths occurred at dry chapters, which would seem to bolster the argument that alcohol-free fraternities can and do make a difference.

In 1997, Phi Delt was among the first fraternities to announce its plan to go dry, arguing that it would save lives, lift grade point averages, improve the condition of chapter houses, boost slumping recruitment numbers by attracting a new kind of college student (fraternity membership nationwide is down 25 percent from its peak in 1990) and help its members return to the core principles on which the fraternity was founded -- friendship, sound learning and moral rectitude. The policy called for all chapter houses to be dry by 2000.

In July, Phi Delta Theta will celebrate its fifth anniversary of being alcohol-free. And while some fraternity leaders still question how effective the policy is in stopping binge drinking ("We're not sure that focusing on where a person drinks will have any impact on how much that person drinks," Mark Anderson, the president of the Sigma Chi Corporation, said), Phi Delt's executive vice president, Bob Biggs, insists the policy is bettering the daily lives of members -- and keeping them safe. For the first time since he can remember, Biggs said, the fraternity isn't facing any lawsuits. "It was common before we instituted this to have four, five, six claims at any one time," Biggs told me. To go with its newfound sobriety, Phi Delt even has a new motto: Brotherhood -- Our Substance of Choice.

But sobering up chapter houses isn't easy, and the backlash has been fierce. Some chapters have refused to go dry, choosing instead to break away from their national organizations. And many theoretically dry chapters are anything but -- there's plenty of alcohol, pot and harder drugs behind closed doors. "I don't think anyone is naive enough to think that there's no alcohol in many dry houses," one fraternity chapter president at Northwestern told me. "If it's done in a somewhat covert way, you're fine." It's often not, and

both Biggs and Dave Westol, executive director of Theta Chi, whose chapters started going dry in 1998, have recently closed chapters that brazenly ignored the no-alcohol policy.

But the greatest opposition to dry fraternities often comes from alumni. Westol has received hundreds of e-mail messages from angry alums who, he said, "can't imagine that a fraternity can be fun without alcohol." He went on to say that among the biggest challenges in persuading current fraternity members to take the dry policy seriously are alums who return to the chapter armed with countless stories about the fraternity's drunken past -- or, worse yet, with six-packs. When I sheepishly admitted to having done just that (minus the six-packs), Westol went easy on me. "Don't beat yourself up," he said, "but you see what I'm talking about."

Many fraternity members can't help thinking that alcohol-free fraternity houses came about not out of genuine concern for their well-being but because the fraternities were worried about their pocketbooks. While Biggs denies that fear of costly lawsuits was the primary factor in going dry, he concedes that increases in litigation and liability premiums played a part in Phi Delta Theta's decision.

In the 1980's, the number of lawsuits and insurance claims resulting from fraternity binge drinking and hazing skyrocketed, causing the National Association of Insurance Commissioners to rank fraternities and sororities as the sixth-worst risk for insurance companies -- right behind hazardous-waste-disposal companies and asbestos contractors. Some insurance companies began refusing to cover fraternities, forcing fraternities to take measures to minimize their risk.

In the mid-90's, Phi Delt's executive board considered going even further. "We wondered, Can we conceive of a fraternity that doesn't allow alcohol in its chapter houses?" Biggs said when I met with him. "But we knew it wouldn't be easy. When we decided to do it, someone made the analogy to when John Kennedy said, 'Let's go to the moon and back by the end of the decade.' So that's what we did." (It's a telling analogy. Neil Armstrong brought his Phi Delt pin with him to the moon's surface in 1969.)

At its annual convention in 1998, the fraternity broke out fireworks to celebrate its 150-year anniversary and its alcohol-free future. But back at Northwestern that fall, "we thought the world was ending," said Nick Logan, the chapter president at the time. "Northwestern had actually told us that we needed to go dry that year, so unlike other Phi Delt chapters that had two years to prepare, we didn't. It was absolute pandemonium. I mean, we're like 19, 20, 21, many of us have been drinking regularly since high school, we join a fraternity partially for the social scene and now we're supposed to just not drink? It was like telling a monk that he can't pray."

Many dry chapters still have members who try to skirt their dry rule. Chapter presidents, who are sometimes under-age, are put in the difficult position of policing the drinking of members who are 21. But even those fraternities that do follow the rules insist that administrators, in their efforts to crack down on drinking, have failed to do just that -- and, in the process, managed to take much of the fun out of fraternity life.

At the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity house at Northwestern, members told me of their fruitless attempt this fall to show the classic 1978 fraternity movie "Animal House" at one of their philanthropic events co-sponsored by a campus sorority. The Sig Eps were all set to make a special T-shirt for the event -- it would read "Fat, Drunk and Stupid Is No Way to Go Through Life, Son," a famous line from the film -- when they say the university "very strongly suggested" they not show the film.

"It was really a very ironic event, of course, because most fraternities now are pretty far from the 'Animal House' model," one Sig Ep brother told me. "But the administration and the Panhellenic Association, which oversees the sororities, didn't see the humor in it. They acted very disappointed in us, because we'd been a frat that had worked hard to dispel the 'Animal House' stereotype."

Then there was the controversy surrounding Sig Ep's annual prep-school party, at which female undergraduates traditionally arrive in their best Catholic schoolgirl attire. As one of the school's four "wet" fraternities, Sig Ep can have parties with alcohol in their house, as long as the beer is sold by an outside

vendor and no one under 21 drinks. But this year the party was going to be dry. "The university brought our attention to some clause in the student handbook," said Jordan Cerf, the chapter's vice president of recruitment, "that says that any event that freshmen attend during the fall quarter in a house has to be dry."

The Sig Eps were still expecting a huge crowd when I talked to them in October. "Here's what the school has done by making this party dry," Nick Johnson, the chapter president, explained. "Before coming to the party, everyone is going to get loaded at their dorm, or off campus, or in their car. They're going to drink more, and they'll drink faster, so that their buzz lasts them through the party. That's really the disingenuous thing about this policy. I don't see how this is keeping anyone safer. It's just moving the binge drinking somewhere else."

I never expected to be a hard-drinking frat boy when I arrived at Northwestern in the fall of 1993. I considered myself far too much of a "free thinker" to join a fraternity, and I certainly wasn't going to be "paying for friends," which is what I considered the monthly dues to be.

There was also my father's fruitless fraternity experience to consider. In 1958 he joined Lambda Chi Alpha at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a fraternity, he says, "for guys other fraternities wouldn't take." Still, it was a welcome social outlet for my shy dad, and he happily went along with the heavy drinking and the endless talk of sorority-house panty raids if it meant having friends. But things went awry when my father wanted to attend a racial-equality march, which didn't gel with the fraternity's conservative views. The chapter president told him not to go, and when my father said he was going anyway, the president insisted that he not wear his fraternity pin. Outraged, my father moved out of the chapter house and started writing anti-fraternity letters to the school newspaper. He was expelled from the fraternity soon after.

My dad's experience played right into my stereotype of fraternities: they were for close-minded people. But as the fall quarter of my freshman year progressed, my anti-fraternity stance softened. I realized that a third of Northwestern's undergraduates (including plenty of people who seemed perfectly decent) belonged to fraternities or sororities. I also loved fraternity parties -- my friends and I spent many weekend nights stumbling from one fraternity kegger to the next. And as much as I liked to mock fraternity guys, I desperately wanted to belong to something. I was a mostly clueless drifter in high school, and I didn't want to be one in college too. As an only child, I was intrigued by the idea of brotherhood -- by the concept of guys contractually obligated to have my back. Maybe paying for friends wasn't such a bad idea, after all.

So I didn't object when my classmate and new friend, Dave, who struck me as even less of a fraternity guy than I was (he was a film major prone to outbursts of hypersensitivity), suggested we head up to Phi Delta Theta and enjoy the free food at its Rush Week event. I didn't know much about the chapter, but Dave apparently knew a brother there. That evening I was introduced to many of the members, and everyone seemed cool enough to me. Dave and I went back the next night, and I was summoned to a room and offered a "bid" -- an invitation to "pledge" membership to the fraternity. I had a Groucho Marx moment -- did I really want to join a fraternity that would have me? -- but I got over it and accepted on the spot.

They threw a pledge T-shirt on me and we ran downstairs, out the front door and onto to the porch, where there was a lot of congratulatory hollering and a few "who's that skinny dude?" whispers from pledges who didn't know me. Before I knew it, I was being hurled high into the cold night air, and everyone started singing a ditty you won't find listed among the official songs of Phi Delta Theta.

To hell to hell with Fiji, to hell with Sigma Nu,  
And if you're not a Phi Delt, to hell to hell with you,  
So listen to me lassie, so listen to my plea,  
Don't ever let a Phi Delt an inch above your knee.  
He'll take you to the back shed and fill you full of rye,  
And soon you'll be the mother of a bouncin' baby Phi.

Soon after pledging, I learned that I wasn't joining a chapter with the most sterling reputation. We were told that in the 1980's, our house was known for spawning "obnoxious jerks." One night some brothers

apparently got drunk, shouted obscenities and "threw things" at marchers during a Take Back the Night rally. University officials booted the fraternity off campus, but not before the brothers got drunk and trashed the place.

I was half-amused and half-horrified by this news, but soon I was too busy being hazed to care much one way or another. We had weekly "lineups" in the main room of the chapter house, where active members, drinking and wielding flashlights, would belittle our physiques and quiz us on arcane fraternity history. We were made to do push-ups until we couldn't anymore, and we were told to lie on our stomachs and cover our behinds, because the Betas, who lived in the chapter house next door, were coming after us. The Betas didn't seem particularly gay to me (we mostly knew them as bigger potheads than we were), but we were made to believe that they wanted nothing more than to have their way with us.

There was also a lot of forced drinking. We were told to down copious amounts of liquor, and most any effort to avoid it (an earnest explanation that alcoholism ran in the family, for example) was usually laughed off. To haze effectively, many of the active brothers had to get drunk, too. After all, hazing isn't much fun when you're sober -- a fact that isn't lost on fraternity leaders who hope that going alcohol-free will reduce hazing.

And maybe it has. The current Phi Deltas at Northwestern seem to value the humiliation of freshmen a lot less than we did. "When I was a pledge last year," Peter Micali told me, "we would be at some off-campus apartment and the actives" -- full members -- "would be like, 'Here, drink this.' But if you didn't want to, they were like, 'O.K., no problem, that's cool.' So we don't do much hazing." One night at a bar, Micali admitted that he actually would have liked to have been hazed a little harder. "I wanted them to be like, 'O.K., you worthless dirtbag, walk through that wall!' That would have been funny."

As much as the actives tried to humiliate us a decade ago, we stayed cocky throughout, and we did the minimum required during our months as pledges: we fetched food, cleaned the house, took our morning Wheaties with beer instead of milk. Soon enough we were initiated and taught the secret handshake and the secret sign, both of which I promptly forgot.

We told ourselves that we were clearly the best fraternity at Northwestern, and we could drink you under the table to prove it. My senior year, though, was to be the beginning of the end. Just after I graduated and stepped awkwardly into the real world, the brothers were faced with the daunting, incomprehensible, surreal prospect of fraternal sobriety. They didn't react well. Brothers disagreed about following the alcohol-free mandate. In May 1999, the university informed the fraternity that its members needed to find a new place to live the following fall. According to *The Chicago Sun-Times*, the school's list of the chapter's infractions included "a sink that was pulled from the wall and used as a urinal; a member who set off a fire alarm by smoking marijuana; throwing garbage, urine, paint and other debris."

David Sykes, the chapter president at the time, told a skeptical reporter that Phi Delt was "no Animal House" and that many of the charges were overblown. The brothers sued Northwestern, but a Cook County Circuit judge dismissed the case as "an unnecessary drain" on the courts. Remarkably, the university let the brothers return to the fraternity house the following year. Everyone was on his best behavior. But over the last three years, the brothers haven't always agreed on how seriously to take their alcohol-free mandate.

In that way, they're not much different from some Phi Deltas who came 150 years before them. The Phi Delta Theta international fraternity -- now home to 170 chapters in 44 states and six Canadian provinces -- was founded by six serious and determined students at Miami University in Ohio on a December night in 1848. Conceived as a secret literary and social society for men of intellectual vigor and upstanding character, the Miami University chapter enjoyed a brief period of fraternal harmony before all hell broke loose.

By 1850, the fraternity was "chaotic with dissension between fraternal idealists and hedonists," writes Hank Nuwer in his book *Wrongs of Passage: Fraternities, Sororities, Hazing and Binge Drinking*. Phi Delt's members -- including a transfer student named Benjamin Harrison, who would later become the 23rd president of the United States -- disagreed about what a fraternity should be.

Was Phi Delta Theta, as its six founding fathers envisioned, about friendship, sound learning and moral rectitude? Or was it a place for boys to be boys, no matter how juvenile and tasteless that might appear to the outside world? Or could it be some ingenious combination of the two, making space for both righteousness and debauchery?

A hard-liner, Harrison quickly got himself elected fraternity president: Phi Delt was to be a place of honor and respectability. He was more than a little displeased when two fraternity members became obscenely drunk at a reception for Pierson Sayre, the last living Revolutionary War soldier. He gave the offending men a second chance after they promised to shape up, but soon enough they were back to their old ways. Harrison threw them out, upon which several other members, who backed the banished brothers, resigned.

The growth of Phi Delta Theta (in 1859, it became the first Greek organization at Northwestern) and other fraternities stalled during the Civil War. But Phi Delt rebounded between 1870 and 1900, as fraternities expanded west. The first reported alcohol- and hazing-related fraternity deaths also occurred during this time, Nuwer recounts. In 1873, a Kappa Alpha Society pledge at Cornell University died when he fell into a gorge after fraternity brothers left him alone in the woods. Nine years later, a blindfolded Delta Kappa Epsilon pledge at Yale pierced himself with a sharp object on a carriage while following orders from fraternity brothers to run down the street. He subsequently died from the injury.

In 1897, the South Carolina State Legislature voted to ban fraternities at the state school; in 1901, Arkansas followed suit. The president of the University of Michigan, James Angell, neatly summed up the feelings of many college presidents who disliked the lack of discipline in fraternity houses when he said, "The great dangers to the residents of these houses are waste of time . . . a substitution of social life for hard study. If the upperclassmen are not of high moral strain, the lowering of the character of the members is inevitable."

During the 1920's, fraternity members proved adept at procuring liquor despite Prohibition. In 1930, a commentary in The New York Times warned that colleges needed to be wary of the "gay-dog alumnus" who visited his old fraternity house, alcohol in tow. Hazing incidents increased in the 30's, leading officials at 14 colleges to join together to crack down on the practice, according to Nuwer.

Fraternity enrollment dropped off during World War II, but it bounced back soon after. While alcohol wasn't technically allowed on many college campuses and in fraternities until the mid-60's, fraternity members were known for ignoring the rule. In 1957, Northwestern's Interfraternity Council began conducting "liquor checks" in chapter houses to catch offenders.

Throughout the Vietnam-era, fraternity enrollment dropped off significantly as the Greek system came to be seen by many as an outdated symbol of establishment culture. But by the mid-1970's, fraternities were again soaring in popularity, openly celebrating mischief and mayhem, while universities did very little to stop them. At Northwestern, Sigma Chi held beer-chugging contests on its front lawn, which it advertised prominently around campus: "Chug for Charity," read one Sigma Chi poster in 1976, just two years before "Animal House" hit movie theaters.

"Back then," Patrick M. Quinn, an archivist at Northwestern, said, "they had kegs inside their frats so they could drink beer all day long. You could smell the weed all the way down to Tech" -- referring to the technology building midway between north and south campus. "It was a crazy time. These days, you walk by the fraternities, and everything is so quiet. It's eerily quiet."

Appearances can, of course, be deceiving. From the outside, the brick, four-story, Ivy-covered Phi Delta Theta house at Northwestern looks like a nice place to live -- it certainly has more charm than the cookie-cutter dorm the school recently built across the way. But walk inside the chapter house and you discover an unmitigated disaster -- a job even the team from "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" would surely dismiss as hopeless. As one freshman put it, "It's shockingly nasty."

During most of my two weeks at Northwestern this fall, the chapter's third-floor hallway was strewn with garbage, and the toilets were indescribably foul. ("I won't even go to the bathroom here," one brother said.)

In the main room, tossed carelessly underneath a pool table littered with cups, flyers, magazines and Papa John's pizza menus, I found the fraternity's '95-'96 framed group photo. It should have been hanging prominently on the wall with the others, but the brothers had apparently run out of space and found the floor a suitable alternative.

Kyle Pendleton, Northwestern's director of fraternity and sorority life, told me that one "effective" way to get fraternity members to take care of their chapter house is to ask them these questions: "What would your fraternity's founders think if they came back to life and walked into your house? Would they approve? Would they want to join?" Either those questions hadn't been asked at Phi Delt or, more likely, the Phi Delt's laughed it off. "Most of us don't take any of this fraternity stuff too seriously," Will Johnson said, strumming a guitar in his room. He acknowledged that he and his brothers are most likely not what the fraternity's leadership had in mind when they went dry. "Yeah, they were probably thinking that if we weren't drunk all the time in the house, that we would get really into being the best fraternity we could be or something. But this is just a place to live and hang out with your friends. I don't think it should be taken as much more than that. All that fraternity ritual and stuff, it's a little silly."

The current brothers are a study in cocky, amused detachment. Their laid-back attitude extends to rush, which at Northwestern happens in the winter instead of the fall. The extra months give Northwestern freshmen ample time to be courted, although the current Phi Delt's are too lazy to do much of that.

"The whole rush thing is really pretty gay," said Matthew Rosenthal, a goofy, curly-haired Phi Delt junior who was nursing a hangover one weekday afternoon in his large room, which is decorated with Frank Zappa and Grateful Dead posters. "Sometimes it feels like we're trying to get them to sleep with us, you know?"

Phi Delt's acknowledge their dry policy initially gives the recruiting advantage to Chi Psi (better known as the Lodge) and Delta Tau Delta, their two biggest competitors, both of which are wet. "There really is no way to positively spin not being able to drink in your chapter house, even when you're 21," said Michels, the chapter president.

When I visited in October, though, both Delta Tau Delta and the Lodge were on probation and were temporarily dry. The former home of David Schwimmer, one of the stars of "Friends," Delt had been in trouble since last spring, following an incident in its chapter room. A freshman girl and a Delt pledge were apparently cavorting privately when other fraternity members -- some under-age and drunk -- burst in and started taking pictures. The girl told her story to The Daily Northwestern, claiming that she heard the stunt was a Delt "tradition," and before long local television crews were parked outside the fraternity, eagerly reporting on this salacious fraternity sex scandal.

The Lodge has had no similar public relations disasters, but the Phi Delt's find plenty of reasons to make fun of it too. Like an aggressive politician going right at an opponent's strength, Phi Delt's like to mock the Lodge's notorious -- and in some freshmen circles, deeply revered -- "floor parties," which are usually packed with sweaty freshmen drunkenly hitting on each other. At mostly dry Northwestern, the floor parties are about as close to "Animal House" as anyone is going to get (and it's still pretty far). "The parties are fun when you're a freshman," admitted Matthew Rosenthal, "but freshmen are happy with whatever as long as they're drunk."

Still, many Phi Delt's confessed that as freshmen they considered pledging the Lodge. "Joining a wet house is definitely tempting for most guys," Rosenthal said. But Rosenthal eventually chose Phi Delt, mostly, he said, because of the colorful personalities of the guys in the house. I heard the same from other brothers. "A lot of fraternities have guys who look, talk and act the same," said Alex Wu, an engaging Phi Delt junior known for his rapping skills. "We have such a cast of characters, and that meant more to me than being able to drink in the house."

The same was true of the fraternity a decade ago. We had football players, swimmers, nerds, preppies, writers, artists, liberals and right-wingers. We were an eclectic bunch, unpredictable in our perspectives on life. The chapter became a little more unpredictable when I came out my junior year. After a plethora of

drunken attempts to convince myself that I liked girls "in that way," I finally accepted what part of me had known since I was 12: I was gay. Once I accepted it, I really wasn't interested in lying about it, and I told my family and some of my friends. But I was living in the fraternity house that year -- was I going to tell my brothers too? If I did, would they disown me -- or, worse yet, keep me around as a courtesy but mock me behind my back? My fraternity was diverse, all right, but it wasn't that diverse. There wasn't anyone in the chapter who was openly gay, and some brothers were clearly homophobic. My freshman year, one brother told me, "Thank God we don't have any fags in this house."

The current Phi Delt at Northwestern don't have an openly gay member and also like to throw the words "gay" and "fag" around a lot (they assumed I was straight), but I'm not convinced the words actually mean much to them. I watched in surprise as two brothers who only hours earlier jokingly labeled Lodge members as "a bunch of pretty-boy fags from Long Island" ridiculed a freshman who walked out of a room when he saw two guys kissing on television. "Dude, what are you, homophobic or something?" one brother asked him. "Grow up, man."

I would have loved to have heard something like that a decade ago. Instead, I drank and drank and became very good at changing pronouns (my boyfriend became a girlfriend, although she was always too busy to come by the house). I didn't like lying, and I tried desperately to build up the courage to tell my brothers. I suspected that my closest friends in the house would be fine with it. As for the others, I was really hoping that brotherhood actually meant something. Would they have my back?

When I finally told my close friends in the house, they promptly told their girlfriends, who then told the whole school. Most important, though, most of my brothers surprised me by accepting me completely. For many of them, I was the first gay guy they'd really known -- and some of them claimed to be heartbroken when I told them that, no, I didn't find them attractive. "If I can't even get gay guys into me," one drunken brother asked me, "how am I supposed to get girls?"

Kyle Pendleton, Northwestern's director of fraternity and sorority life, kept urging me to visit Sigma Chi. It is, he told me, "the model fraternity in many ways."

I could see immediately why Pendleton liked the place so much. The house is spotless and majestic. (Frankly, it looks and feels a lot like a sorority.) But more than that, Sigma Chi takes its mission as a new and redesigned fraternity very seriously, and it is, according to most fraternity guys on campus, the driest of the dry fraternities.

"We don't want to be a house that thinks the only way to have fun is to be drunk, stupid and belligerent," Diego Berdakin, a sophomore and Sigma Chi's president, told me one afternoon as he gave me a tour of the house, with its beautiful woodwork and king-size beds (both thanks to big-spending alumni). "We're looking to live up to the ideals that the fraternity was founded on. At the same time, we're trying to build our own legacy, a whole new model of what a fraternity can be. We're not interested in being anything like 'Animal House.'"

"If you look at this chapter five or six years ago," Berdakin continued, "we were considered one of the top fraternities on campus, but I don't think the brothers back then really respected the fraternity. You could spend two straight days just trying to think up everything a fraternity could do wrong, and I'm sure they did it all."

In 2000, this chapter of Sigma Chi was shut down by its national headquarters for being too unruly, a far cry from what it is today. Last spring, as part of its New Chapter Initiative, the fraternity's leadership recruited about 45 Northwestern students to start the chapter again. Some never expected to join a fraternity but were intrigued by the idea of starting one from scratch. Others, like Berdakin, are engaging and likable students who wanted to join a chapter that wasn't about partying and hazing. And some joined because, as members of several other fraternities told me, "no other chapter would take them."

While it's difficult to take issue with Sigma Chi's focus on things that actually matter (Berdakin spoke often about wanting to have a house "with integrity"), something about the place spooked me. It struck me as too

clean, too perfect. At one point, I had to use the bathroom and found myself staring at a sign above the sink that read: "Wash your hands. Dirty hands spread disease." Was this the redesigned American fraternity?

Pendleton also spoke highly of Sigma Phi Epsilon, saying that while the chapter is wet, its focus isn't on drinking. The house was hard to miss, with a moose head and strobe light protruding from its top window.

Most Sig Ep chapters, including Northwestern's, have adopted the Balanced Man Program, which Sig Ep's national leadership developed in the early 90's to combat what the fraternity's national spokesman, Scott Thompson, called "a fraternity culture of boozing, drugging and hazing." The program doesn't restrict drinking in the chapter house, but it does something nearly as radical and arguably more meaningful: it has done away with the "pledge system," meaning that new members who join the fraternity have nearly all the rights and responsibilities of active members.

"New members don't pledge for a certain period of time, get hazed, get initiated and then show up for parties until they graduate," Thompson said. "In the Balanced Man Program, men join, and they are developed from the time they join until the time they graduate. Part of that development focuses on building a sound mind and sound body, a simple philosophy that we took from the ancient Greeks."

Thompson supports Sig Ep chapters that choose to go dry on their own (a dozen have), but he says the fraternity doesn't force the issue. "We believe that if we recruit smart men and put them in an environment where they respect each other, they're going to make smart decisions," he said. I heard similar reasoning from Nick Johnson and Jordan Cerf, Sig Ep seniors who spoke fondly of the Balanced Man philosophy and clearly valued their fraternity experience. They pride themselves on being a well-liked chapter where girls "feel safe" and know "the door will be held open for them."

But Johnson and Cerf also talked a lot about having a good time. They were visibly giddy at the news that Kappa Alpha Theta, considered one of Northwestern's top sororities, had chosen to do Homecoming with them. "That would have never happened 10 years ago," Cerf said.

When I asked them why, they struggled to put it delicately. "I wouldn't want to use the word cooler, exactly, to describe us versus the guys from back then," Cerf said. "But, you know, those guys were just starting out and weren't really known on campus."

Johnson assured me, "They were all-around nice guys, but maybe, in terms of social presence, they weren't quite there."

Before spending time with the Sig Eps, I was skeptical of the Balanced Man Program. Fraternities often coin new initiatives that, in practice, mean very little. But I left feeling thoroughly impressed. More than any fraternity boys I visited at Northwestern, the Sig Eps seem to be, well, balanced men. And they're proof that a wet fraternity doesn't necessarily mean an unruly one.

They're also proof that there are other ways, besides outlawing liquor, to redesign the American fraternity. Going dry may be a necessary step for some chapters, but the more I hung around Northwestern's fraternity boys, the less I saw regulating alcohol as particularly relevant to the health and personality of fraternities. For me, the ideal fraternity would somehow combine the strengths of Northwestern's Sigma Chi, Sig Ep and Phi Delt chapters. It would stress integrity, character and leadership. But it would also be a place where fraternity boys are allowed to be fraternity boys, however unseemly and absurd their choices may appear to the rest of us. Without that, the redesigned American fraternity may be no more balanced than the one that was scrapped in the first place.

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