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jim spencer

The brotherhood of booze

By [Jim Spencer](#)

Denver Post Columnist

They call themselves a fraternity.

Only the first message about brotherhood that the men of Chi Psi sent to Gordie Bailey was this:

Party 'til you puke.

After being blindfolded - more Chi Psi male bonding - Bailey's "brothers" drove him and 26 other pledges into the Rocky Mountains and supplied them with copious amounts of cheap liquor and wine.

Bailey partied.

Then, he puked

Then, he died.

A perverted notion of fraternity is alive and well on America's campuses, not just at the Chi Psi house at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where Bailey's body was found last week.

Hundred-proof relationships existed in the Greek social system when I went to college 30 years ago. Older friends tell me those relationships were around long before that. Actually, drinking buddies are as old as fermentation.

In college, I joined a social fraternity filled with high school friends and football players. I didn't pick it because of its commitment to public service or its penchant for deep, life-affirming spirituality. I picked it because it had good parties and needed dues so bad it no longer asked new members to pledge.



Jim Spencer

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So I endured no blindfolded binges, no beatings to get my "brothers" to sign a pledge paddle. No one tested my knowledge of the national charter or the secret handshake. My ritual induction included writing and signing a check.

At the same time, I don't believe my ease of entry made me any more or less loyal to my "brothers" than Bailey.

We both belonged to the brotherhood of booze. He drank during his initiation. I drank Saturday nights at frat house gatherings. In either case, what bound us to our peers had the staying power of a fifth of Jack Daniels or a case of Coors.

That brings us to the second message about brotherhood the men of Chi Psi sent to Bailey.

They wrote it in marking pen.

After the 18-year-old freshman passed out from his drinking binge, it seems no one tried to revive him. Instead, they doodled on his face in jest. It's a tradition, don't you know.

A lot of traditions converged last week in Boulder.

There was the long-standing, if flawed, assumption that young people are simply indestructible.

There was the abiding myth - created by human insecurity and sustained by the makers of alcoholic beverages - that everybody is more appealing when they've been drinking.

Finally, there was the enduring illusion of compassion in a society grown so superficial by its worship of narcissism that it can mistake a drunken impulse for intimacy.

This gets us to the third message about brotherhood that the men of Chi Psi sent. Bailey was no longer around to receive it.

After he died, police began to ask what happened. Several Chi Pisis refused to talk freely and honestly with investigators. Instead, the cops said, Bailey's "brothers" lawyered up.

Sure, they have the right to remain silent. Yes, anything they say can and should be used against them.

But the worst charges they face, according to police, are probably misdemeanors. Besides, they call themselves a

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