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## Students Find Alcohol Learning Curve a Deadly One

### Tragedies Suggest Youths Don't Know Overindulgence Alone Can Kill

By AMY ARGETSINGER  
Washington Post Staff Writer

The night before he died, as he entered the Alpha Tau Omega house for the last time, Terry Stirling left his shoes at the door.

It was big brother/little brother night at the Old Dominion University fraternity in Norfolk, so Stirling and other pledges assumed they would get drunk. Stumbling drunk and marble-mouthed drunk and, if history was any guide, probably even puking

drunk. The only shame for an ATO would be passing out with his shoes on. Under the unwritten code of the house, it gave his fraternity brothers license to mess with him—scribble stuff on his face with permanent marker, for instance.

Stirling, 19, a freshman from Ruckersville, Va., never woke up the morning of Dec. 1, 2000. At some point in the early hours, with the alcohol content of his blood nearing a lethal level, he choked to death on his vomit.

As in the hauntingly similar death of 19-year-old Daniel Reardon at the University of Maryland in February, and scores of other recent alcohol fatalities on campuses nationwide, Stirling's case reveals a hard-core yet strangely naive collegiate party culture.

"College students don't know you can die" simply from drinking too much, said Nancy Schulte of the Center for the Advancement of Public Health at George Mason Universi-

See DRINKING, B5, Col. 2



### New Solutions, Old Problem

As heavy drinking among students becomes an increasing problem, colleges are trying novel remedies.

HEALTH, Page F1



## Patuxent Waterfront Plan Called Unlikely

### Curry Proposes Zoning For Upscale Housing

"What's helpful is if they help us set priorities . . . and not make us make those deci-

fluence.

"The CTB needs to cut through various

the books, getting them even implemented would be a delightful change."

Staff researcher Margaret Smith contributed to this report.

## T H E R E G I O N

# Students Don't Link Drunkenness, Death

DRINKING, From B1

ty. "They know about drunk driving or . . . unprotected sex, but they have never heard of anyone drinking themselves to death."

About 1,400 students a year succumb in drinking-related deaths, though fewer than 300 of those result from alcohol poisoning or choking in their sleep, a recent study showed. For every such fatality, many college officials believe, there are 10 to 20 close calls.

Details about the death of Reardon—who registered a 0.5 blood-alcohol level after drinking bourbon at a Phi Sigma Kappa "bid night" party—remain scarce while Prince George's County prosecutors weigh criminal charges. But with its striking similarities, the Stirling case offers a window into a world where such risky drinking thrives.

Stirling guzzled as much as 1½ pints of 151-proof rum and several bourbon-and-Coke cocktails under the watchful eye of fraternity brothers before he passed out, according to depositions given by members in a civil lawsuit filed by Stirling's family.

Though ATO members say they checked on him several times during the night, none was alarmed enough by his condition to call for an ambulance until it was too late. Stirling's blood-alcohol level later was recorded at 0.33 percent. Another pledge was hospitalized with severe alcohol poisoning that morning but survived.

Douglas Fierberg, a District lawyer who is representing the family in its suit against the now-defunct fraternity chapter, blames the drinking culture of fraternities—"an industry that slides right under the regulatory radar screen for the provision of alcohol to minors," he said.

Yet not every college drinking death has oc-

curred at a fraternity; a number have occurred in freshman dormitories or off-campus 21st birthday parties. Common to many of these deaths seems to be a culture where passing out from excessive drinking is considered a normal way to end an evening.

Only one brother suggested taking the unconscious Stirling to a hospital. Even then, his biggest concern was the pledge's potential hangover. "He didn't think that Terry was going to die," another member recalled.

The third of four children, Stirling graduated from Greene County High School in 1999, and enrolled that fall at ODU.

He quickly decided to accept a bid from ATO, where his older brother had been an officer. "He said he wanted to take a leadership role" in the fraternity, said his mother, Kandi Sterling, who changed the spelling of her last name after a divorce.

But while trying to pull down a road sign as a prank, a drunken Stirling sliced opened his hand, forcing him to return home for several months of surgery and physical therapy. He went back to ODU in fall 2000, and started the pledge process again.

Though the national organization of ATO forbids serving alcohol to minors or at pledging events, court documents suggest that it flowed plentifully at the ODU chapter. The university had charged ATO with alcohol violations twice in recent years.

Fraternity members maintain that participating in drinking rituals was strictly voluntary. "It wasn't something that we understood we had to do," Chris Logan testified. "We were asked to do it if we wanted to, and most of the time, all of us did."

The ATOs were not oblivious to the risks of alcohol. Then-President Nick Shawnik had undergone risk-management training with the

national organization. And he had raised concerns about the chapter's declining grades. In fall 2000, the chapter voluntarily adopted a rule: No drinking in the main house Sunday through Thursday.

Fraternity representatives said Stirling had a drinking problem long before he joined ATO. Kandi Sterling denies that, but fraternity members said in depositions that some had confronted Stirling about how his drinking was causing him to miss classes.

That didn't stop them from inducting Stirling as a member or including him in various alcohol-fueled gatherings. And the chapter's ban on weeknight drinking did not stop the big brother/little brother event on a Thursday: They simply held it next door, at another house rented by ATO brothers.

Fraternity members reportedly drank little if any that night, since their job was to watch the pledges. After one pledge drained a 40-ounce bottle of beer and threw up, the brothers stopped him from drinking. Another pledge had stopped drinking on his own; drunk and stumbling nonetheless, he had to be helped to bed. Brothers arranged him in front of the toilet in what one member called the "prayer stance"—kneeling, with his arms draped over the cold porcelain rim and his hands propping his face over the bowl.

A third pledge stretched out on the floor in the middle of a conversation and slowly drifted off to sleep. The brothers moved him to a bathroom, then later to a couch.

Stirling was the last to go down, according to one brother. Chris Marfori said that over the course of the night, Stirling drank a fifth of the potent rum and sipped a mixture of Coke and Jim Beam. Only a few brothers remained in the house by the time he suddenly stumbled sideways against a wall. Stirling insisted that he

was all right, but the brothers made him sit down. Finally, he told his friends, "I'm going to sleep," Marfori recalled, then leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

"That was it for him for the night," Marfori told lawyers. "That's all he wanted to drink."

It was agreed that Stirling could not be left sitting in a chair with no arms. So they laid him stomach-down on a couch, propping his forehead on his arm over the edge of the couch, with his chin hanging free. And they placed a bowl below his face to catch any vomit.

Members testified that they checked on Stirling several times.

About 8:30 a.m., Chris Logan was on his way to fetch laundry from the drier when he found Stirling lying facedown on the couch. His naked back was turning blue. "I walked over there to try to shake him, see if he was awake," Logan said. Stirling did not wake up. "I checked to see if he was breathing. He wasn't."

A rescue squad arrived at the house at 8:46 a.m. Stirling was pronounced dead at 9:04 a.m.

The national organization of ATO moved quickly to shut down the ODU chapter. Local investigations, however, resulted in no charges. Prosecutors said there was not enough evidence to pursue manslaughter or hazing charges. And university officials were unable to determine who had purchased the liquor.

Stirling's death, though, led to much soul-searching at ODU, where there is talk of moving Greek houses onto campus, where they can be better monitored, and questions of how to better inform students that "alcohol abuse is sometimes lethal," said Dean of Students Dana Burnett.

Maryland, likewise, held a mandatory alcohol abuse program for fraternity and sorority members last night. And it has taken steps to limit alcohol use on campus.

"The thing I keep realizing is that every year it's a new crop of students," Burnett said. "We've learned these lessons at Terry's death, but we have to keep teaching them."