

## WAGING PEACE ON FRATERNITIES

*From the front lines . . . a reluctant warrior's story*

By Lee Burdette Williams

THE FIRST CLUE comes from Scott Warren's answering machine. His voice offers a quote from Oscar Wilde: "The truth is never pure and rarely simple." One has obviously reached the home of someone who has wandered through the forest of ambiguity so often associated with student affairs.

Warren, the former dean of students at Denison University, had what one could call an interesting tenure at Denison. One could also, less charitably, call it a hellish time that came to a climax one night as fraternity members protested the university's decision to force them into nonresidential status. "It was like something out of *Die Hard*," says Warren, whom I recently talked to about the events of April 22, 1995.

The story, however, begins long before that night, in typical fashion: a small college struggling with the role its fraternities play within the institution. Granville, Ohio, the home of Denison, is a place seemingly out of context—a small, New England village situated just east of Columbus. Fraternities had thrived at Denison for over a hundred years, though few would claim their more recent contributions to the University helped the school itself to thrive.

Scott Warren arrived at Denison to assume the dean's duties in 1992, the first year of a planned era of reform designed to increase the fiscal and behavioral accountability of the ten fraternities at Denison. The reforms grew out of an extensive review requested by the president and the Board of Trustees, who were growing increasingly frustrated by the fraternities' seem-

ing lack of commitment to the university's academic reputation. In addition, the physical condition of the fraternity houses was a grave concern among those responsible for the financial state of the institution.

"It became clear," Warren recalls, "that the reforms that first year weren't going far enough. The message to fraternities was clear: 'your fate is in your own hands; you need to take more initiative for yourselves and be more accountable,' but the groups weren't rising to the challenge."

So Warren upped the level of dialogue, drafting a paper of his own—"The Future of Fraternities at Denison: Renaissance or Requiem?"—that became a starting point for additional discussion. The president took Warren's paper

and used it as the basis for her own white paper, which outlined Warren's three options for Denison's approach to the fraternities: abolish them completely, make a huge investment of resources in the groups and their houses, or retain them but insist on nonresidential status. The first option was, according to Warren, both the easiest to implement and the most difficult to stomach. He wrote in his paper, "The fallout from such a move would be unfathomable. Thousands of alumni would become disaffected overnight." Such a result made clear the dilemma Denison faced: the fraternity system creates, Warren wrote, a situation where fraternity members have conflicting loyalties—loyalty to their fraternity, loyalty to the University. When those institutions have conflicting needs or goals, fraternity members typically side with their fraternity, undermining the sense of total

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community that a college or university needs to weather serious change.

As the dean, Warren was thrust into the middle of a battle that had historical, financial, educational, and emotional implications for Denison. "I knew that in taking this issue seriously, we were asking for changes that in this culture would be extremely difficult. Fraternities are a major part of Denison's identity. I realized this would be the most challenging, trying, and difficult thing I had done as a dean."

During this time, when the fraternities' fate hung in the balance, Warren tried to maintain a carefully measured approach. "I tried to play the middle person, a facilitating role. There had to be somewhere students felt they could go and get a fair hearing." Though he made clear some of his opinions in his original document, Warren and his staff did all they could to remain neutral. "There were plenty of students, faculty, and other staff coming out on both sides of the issue, so many passionate advocates. I never felt a need to get on my own soapbox. We tried to exercise restraint, to bring people together." But Warren's best intentions were undermined by the suspicion and frustration evidenced by the fraternity members. "The dean can't help but be a symbol of change."

**A**FTER A YEAR of struggling, the board made a decision. They concluded it was not, according to Warren, "in the best interests of the college to invest in residential fraternities," citing the current quality of the groups, the overall health of the community, and the critical facts tendered by a consultant who reported that fraternities were not playing a positive role in the recruitment of students and, indeed, appeared to be a negative force in student retention. The board's decision meant that fraternities, while continuing as student organizations, would no longer be granted the privileges of living and dining in separate housing. They would be required to "live and eat in University residence halls," according to the board's memo to the Denison community.

Warren says, "The president had to have a lot of courage to do this. And the board—there was a lot of loyalty among some members to fraternities. For them to reach that decision was one of the most soul-searching,

gut-wrenching decisions I could imagine. I watched that process with enormous respect. They really wanted to do what was best for the college."

The board's decision came the morning of April 22, and in a carefully orchestrated plan of dissemination, Warren and several other senior administrators quickly drafted a memo to the campus community. "By that afternoon, there was a copy of the memo in every student, faculty, and staff mailbox." Another memo was drafted and quickly sent to parents and alumni. Warren made certain that staff from the student newspaper and radio

station were quickly informed. Thus, word spread even more quickly than the usual small-college rumor travels, and by that evening, a group of students had gathered near the fraternity houses.

"It doesn't take many students to turn a protest into a very ugly thing," Warren noted when recalling that evening. A bonfire raged on fraternity row as approximately 500 students gathered to protest the announcement of the board's decision. "Many of them were incredibly inebriated," says Warren. "It really was a small riot." What ensued was widespread destruction in the fraternity houses as objects—small and large . . . a mattress . . . a piano—were thrown out of windows. "It was just an amazingly self-destructive thing they were doing to their houses—almost as though they were saying, 'if we can't have them, no one else can.' It really saddened alumni, who couldn't believe the damage they did." Even though police and firefighters were present, Warren says, "It would have taken the entire National Guard to prevent what they were doing. Later, when alums asked us why we didn't stop the destruction, we could only answer that one, we were outnumbered, and two, we were trying to avoid an even worse confrontation."

However, Warren, alone, did try to stop it. During the conflagration, he made a calculated decision: "I went into the crowd. I think I did it against my better judgment, but it seemed important to give them someone to vent at. I thought I could break it up, but that was completely unrealistic. My friends and wife told me later that I was crazy, that I could have been hurt." In fact,

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several students did threaten to throw Warren himself onto the bonfire. "But these were still our students. I had to believe that. I had to believe that they wouldn't hurt me. Maybe that was a naive belief, but luckily I was right. Whenever one person would appear to be physically threatening me, another student would step in to protect me. It was sort of like seeing the best and the worst of them at the same time. It was a classic situation of alcohol and the inflamed anger of people who felt disenfranchised."

By 3 A.M., the scene had quieted, but Warren was still there, watching. He had made an important decision—one he had been considering for a long time. "I knew I wasn't going to be able to continue as dean," he says. "I don't think the same person can be integrally involved in the implementation of difficult change and the one to lead the community out of that transition and into the future. I was not the best person to see this through."

AND SO Warren resigned his post as dean and returned to teaching. "It was time for me to leave. I know we had accomplished the most significant change in the history of Denison, and that this change quickly began to pay dividends, like the largest first-year class in recent history, a class of extremely high quality. And there are efforts under way to restructure the social life at Denison. The college is becoming stronger and better because of this."

Warren's thoughts on fraternities in general reflect the thinking of someone who has quite literally seen a trial by fire. "Fraternities are nineteenth-century creations, and they need to change to still be viable and relevant on the campuses of the twenty-first century. On the whole, students are decent people, and among those who were the most difficult that night, there was definitely a 'nothing personal' message there somewhere. They truly believed they had become victims. But in many ways, colleges are to blame for allowing fraternities to play the role of primary social broker on campus."

Denison's restructuring continues as Warren watches from a distance. The institution has reallocated resources in a way uncommon in these times of budget cuts experienced by other student affairs divisions across the country: large programming budgets, extensive renovations of social facilities.

In retrospect, Warren sees clearly the difficulties of enacting change in such a culture. "It's not a new revelation, but you simply don't make comprehensive, profound changes in any culture very easily. You have to have a clear vision and be painstakingly careful to assess the potential dangers. Such efforts are not to be taken lightly. That's obvious.

But until you've been involved in that process, it's hard to understand how intransigent history really is."

As for the future of fraternities at campuses other than Denison's, one might refer to Warren's thoughtful piece on the university's options:

Fraternities are at a crucial crossroads in American history. Either they will find ways to recover the reality of those ideals upon which they were founded . . . or they will find themselves fast becoming relics. Either they will find ways to become more open, intellectual, and diverse organizations capable of contributing to the academic mission of the larger community, or they will face increasing isolation and irrelevance. The choices are ultimately theirs. Colleges and universities can provide support and guidance, but the fraternities need to internalize the vision of a different future and possess the courage and ability to pursue it. And that is no small challenge.

From a man who appreciates the complexity of truth, a statement made with such certainty deserves attention.



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