

MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:



This is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. I'm Michel Martin. Writer Caitlin Flanagan sparked a fresh debate about college life with her story "The Dark Power of Fraternities" for The Atlantic magazine last month. Her year-long investigation focused on many programs, ranging from drunken brawls to sexual assaults to hazing deaths, that are often associated with the nation's fraternities. But she focused her reporting, as she was - made clear, mainly on predominantly white nominally integrated fraternities.

She did not focus on historically African-American Greek organizations, which play a significant role in college life on many HBCUs. Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University in Louisiana did focus on this for the March issue of The Atlantic. He wrote that many of the students who turn to historically black fraternities for fellowship and support on campus often find humiliation, abuse or worse, and he is with us now. President Kimbrough, thanks so much

for joining us once again.

WALTER KIMBROUGH: Thank you.

MARTIN: Also joining us once again is Lawrence Ross. He's the author of "The Divine Nine: The History of African-American Fraternities and Sororities," and we often talk to him about these issues. Mr. Ross, thank you so much for joining us once again.

LAWRENCE ROSS: Great to be here.

MARTIN: So - and we should mention that both of you are members of a black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha. So maybe - I don't know. President Kimbrough, why don't you start by asking - let me start by asking you why were you attracted to that experience for yourself?

KIMBROUGH: Well, part of it for me is that growing up in Atlanta and seeing a lot of the men who were very active in my church. My father's also a member of the fraternity, and I had a history of involvement in high school. That was one of the things that drew me to the organization.

I was at the University of Georgia - very small black percentage. And so you're looking for those meaningful relationships, particularly for a young man. And so knowing of the work of the organization, people that were influencing me in church or at high school, that was important for me. Then when you look at all of the history of the organization, I mean, that was an easy sale for me to want to be involved.

MARTIN: Was it a good experience for you?

KIMBROUGH: It was a great experience. I've had leadership roles through that organization. I always tell people that a lot of the skills that I use as a college president, I actually learned as an undergraduate, served on our board of directorates as an undergraduate, had a chance to

interact with college presidents. So it was an excellent, excellent training for what I do on a day-to-day basis.

MARTIN: So the problems that are now being talked about with hazing, for example, is that something that is a problem on your campus?

KIMBROUGH: Well, I always tell students on campuses like mine or where ever I'm on a campus is that it's a double-edged sword. There's a lot a positive things they can get from the connections I have and what I know about the institution, but they understand they're going to be held at a higher standard.

So there probably is a level of fear that exists when I'm on a campus that doesn't exist other places just because - I mean, I've had experience with this that, not only are people going to sue them, they're going to sue me and the institution because they're like, well, this is a guy who studies this. So if they did something wrong, everybody, you know, is held to higher standards. So I feel bad for the students in that regard, but it usually helps keep a lot of the, you know, foolishness down.

MARTIN: OK, I don't think I heard a yes or no. Is this a problem on your campus or not?

KIMBROUGH: Oh, I don't know if it is a problem or not. I would say that, no, I haven't had in terms of major hazing cases on our campus, in terms of chapters being suspended for hazing. At least since I've been here, and that's been a year and a half, we haven't had any cases. So that's a good thing. But is it possible that there is something that exists? I'd be naive to say no.

MARTIN: Lawrence Ross, you've written a history of black fraternities and sororities. In fact, you're kind of the go-to person on this question. Caitlin Flanagan, in her piece, made it clear that alcohol is a very big part of the problem for a number of these white fraternities - or at least they were formerly all-white and as she called them sort of nominally integrated - that alcohol is a big problem, off-campus housing is a big problem where they're kind of outside of the eye of university, you know, administrators. But you still say, and you have said that hazing is still a problem on these black fraternities and sororities. What kind of behavior are we talking about, and when did this start to be a thing?

ROSS: Well, our - I think that we diverged from our white counterparts in that African-American fraternities and sororities tend not to have hazing centering around alcohol or substance abuse. Ours tends to be around physical activities. There's a tendency to be a - to set up challenges that have obstacles that deal with pain, for back of a letter term.

And it's one of those things that has actually - you can go back to - you mentioned in the pre - in the setup that Langston Hughes is a member of Omega Psi Phi, and he talks about the fact that when he was pledging Omega Psi Phi, in his autobiography, in - I think in the 1920s, he talked about the fact that he, you know, received, you know, strokes from wooden paddles due to the fact that he was a writer.

And it was - his brothers just, you know, just did it arbitrarily because he was a writer. So it goes back that far. And then - but you start to see, like, in the modern era you start to see from the - and Brother Kimbrough can actually talk a lot about this, too. You see the evolution of hazing from the 1950s, the 1960s, and you see the intensity. And then you see the reaction from the organizations to try to put some type of structure around our traditional pledge systems. But each time that they do it, they pretty much try to simply concentrate the actual abuse that actually occurs during their pledge programs.

MARTIN: Yeah, I was going to ask you that. Can I stop you there and ask you that? Is it your view - and I understand that I'm asking you to take an educated guess, if I may - that that this behavior has escalated over time? Is it your view that this kind of - that this thing has escalated, and if so, why might that be?

ROSS: I think it's - a better word instead of escalate would be metastasized. It's like a cancer. It was terrible, for lack of a better term, prior to Joel Harris's death at Morehouse University for Alpha Phi Alpha, in turn which was like the catalyst for changing the whole kind of "School Daze" above-ground pledging. And what it basically did was, for the last 24 years or so, is to put it underground and to then create a scenario where the abuse has incredibly intensified because we can't see it.

And I'm not saying that the solution would be to bring it above ground, I'm just saying that pretty much, that the organizations have seemingly lost control over the majority of their chapters in terms of being able to know whether or not their organizations are actually legitimately following

the programs or if they're not. And this is like how Brother Kimbrough was talking about, you know, at Dillard, even as the president of Dillard, he can't reliably say that someone is not right now, as we're doing this interview, hitting someone in the head. We can't do that. There's almost like an assumption on all of our campuses that it is a possibility at all times.

MARTIN: Well, wait. I want to go back to President Kimbrough's piece where he wrote about this where he said that, for example, that these kids all know that hazing is illegal. You said, they all must all know hazing is illegal. They must know it is against their respective fraternity and campus policies. They must know that if caught, there could be harsh sanctions, including legal ones.

And year after year, they beat people. You also say in your piece, President Kimbrough, that there are national leaders, scholars, lawyers and experts, all who say, don't haze, have no credibility with these young people. You say they're young geniuses because you say that on the - you know, they come in here, maybe they're 17, 18, 19 years old, and then, like, a year later they're all geniuses sort of running the place. Why is that?

What doesn't your word have more say? Why doesn't the word of these distinguished people, presumably part of the reason these young people want to join these groups - because you went there, and you were part of them - that they're not listening to these messages? Why do you think that is?

KIMBROUGH: Well, because at that time and in that place, it is their organization. It is their chapter. I always tell people that there really is a myth that these are national or international organizations - not for the average student. Their world of that organization is the people on that campus and those who have recently left, whether they graduated or not. That is the organization. It is not these other folks.

And so those are the people that matter the most what they think and what those that have recently left think and not the experts, not the national presidents. They don't care about any of that because this is what they want to do. And so they sort of, I guess, rationalize, or as I say, irrationalize, that what they want to do is the right way. And they've signed documents saying, we will not haze.

They go to workshops on campus. So they understand all of that, but then deep down, they were saying to themselves that this is what we want to do. I experienced it, and if this person is going to be a legitimate member, they must experience this, too.

ROSS: Can I add to that?

MARTIN: Yes, I was going to ask you about that because one of the things I think many people might find surprising about this is that, you know, it's so much a part of the work of African-American leaders has been to expose the physical abuse of young people of color by people like law enforcement and things of that sort.

So I think a lot of people don't understand why is it that then you come to a place that's supposed to be a safe haven, and you find your brothers or sisters engaging in physical abuse as a rite of passage? And I think that - I'm just - if you could just spend one more minute, Mr. Ross, on this, what do you think is the appeal of this?

ROSS: I think one of the issues is that even within the construct of who we are, we do great work, and we also live within this issue of hazing kind of in a conspiracy of delusion. I think our organizations aren't really in the anti-hazing business. They're more into the anti-mitigating liability business. I don't have any doubt that our - like, our leaders don't want to see anyone hurt, and they don't want our, you know, our fraternity and sorority brands to be set up as a place where people actually get hurt. But I don't necessarily think that they think that pledging is wrong. I think the members like the idea of not hazing, as long as it kind of conforms to their own rationalized version of what is and what isn't hazing, which usually correlates to their own personal experience.

And then we get the aspirants who want the respect and the traditions and everything else that drew Brother Kimbrough and myself to our fraternity. And they're looking to do whatever it takes to be validated. And then at the end, if we get an end product what happened - you know, someone gets hurt, then it all falls apart. And I think it really stunts us in terms of, you know, one, our moral - excuse me - our moral ability to talk on issues when we are sometimes seen as the problem.

MARTIN: President Kimbrough, I only have about a couple of minutes left. And you wrote in

your piece about some of the steps that you are already taking to address this. You said that, look, when I travel to speak to students, I don't appeal to their sense of right and wrong anymore. I just get facts, let them know the consequences and that if they mess up after I have been there, I will anxiously testify against them. And you show gruesome injuries. You show members in handcuffs. You talk about financial settlements that affect their parents. And you said that they're shaken for a while, but you're not sure that this has any lasting impact. What might?

KIMBROUGH: You know, that is the million dollar question, and maybe - Brother Ross and I, we have conversations offline, and maybe at some point we'll figure it out. I don't know. I'm really at a point where I'm throwing my hands up. And I just - I don't know what it's going to take to change the culture when, you know, logically, you can point out to students that here are the rules, here are the consequences, and you don't want to get involved in this. But they still feel like the risk - the reward is greater than the risk. So they continue to do these things, and then when something happens, it's like, oh, well, now I need sympathy and those kinds of things. I have no idea. And, I mean, I've been traveling and speaking on campuses since right after I finished my undergrad degree. So that's over 20 years. And I just - I don't see the change in the culture. I don't.

MARTIN: Lawrence Ross, what about you? What do you think would make a difference? I mean, Caitlin Flanagan, in her previous piece about fraternities in general, focusing predominantly on previously all-white or predominantly-white fraternities, made a big push on alcohol and getting alcohol out of that experience. And she said that in fact getting alcohol out of the experience has actually improved recruitment because a lot of people were disgusted by - and good candidates were disgusted by the environment in these places, and so they were avoiding them. And actually, their recruitment has surged. But you're saying alcohol is not really the issue here, that alcohol is not a big factor here. So from your perspective, Mr. Ross, what would make a difference?

ROSS: I think you have to change the whole paradigm. I'm with Brother Kimbrough. Sometimes I throw my hands up, too. And I actually go to a white fraternity that actually has done kind of, like, changing the paradigm. Sigma Phi Epsilon has their Balanced Man Program, which is kind of the idea that, you know, you get rid of pledging, which I don't think we could actually do amongst the black fraternities and sororities.

But the idea is continue development and basically providing value for the college member as they are there. So almost what the idea is that if we provide you with enough resources, with enough value to the point where you look and you say, wait a second, I'm getting all this

mentorship. I'm getting all this value. Why would I throw it away by doing X, Y, Z? It's the only thing that actually could, you know, give some sort of balance to what is pretty much a very attractive thing to do, which is to feel tied into the traditions of pledging and hazing and the respect that you actually get. You have to have something beyond just, you know, what we do, you know, which is to tell them not to do this because it doesn't really have that much of an effect. I've been on campuses where I've told them, you know, all the same things Brother Kimbrough has told him and then read two months later that they were involved in hazing incidents...

MARTIN: How do you...

ROSS: ...With the most...

MARTIN: Just briefly, Mr. Ross, how do you feel now that this is all coming out, as a person who's been following this somewhat in closed circles for a while? How do you feel now that this is all coming into light?

ROSS: It's good that it's coming out. I want some revolutionary action, not just from advocates from, you know, like Brother Kimbrough and myself and a number of other people. I want some revolutionary action from presidents of some of the organizations, people who could actually change the paradigm and have the power to do it.

MARTIN: Lawrence Ross is the author of "The Divine Nine: The History of African-American Fraternities and Sororities." He joined us from NPR West. Walter Kimbrough is the president of Dillard University in New Orleans. He was kind of join us from member station WWNO. Thank you both so much for speaking with us.

KIMBROUGH: All right, thank you.

ROSS: Thank you. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.



