

For years, FAMU parents warned officials of hazing

BY DENISE-MARIE BALONA
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In the years leading up to the beating death of Florida A&M University drum major Robert Champion on Nov. 19, parents begged university President James Ammons and other top officials to take a harder stand against hazing of marching band members.

Family members expressed their anger and fear in letters, emails, text messages and during meetings with officials after their children told them about a culture of abuse that started almost immediately after students began practicing with the famed Marching 100, according to interviews, student testimonials and public records obtained by the Orlando Sentinel.

Emerging from the complaints is a picture of an administration that was either unwilling or unable to stem a decades-long, entrenched tradition of hazing despite repeated injuries, lawsuits and the university's efforts to warn band members that the practice was illegal and could lead to suspensions, fines or arrests.

Students even signed anti-hazing pledges at the start of the school year. But those promises were often ignored on the practice field and in places outside the view of campus leaders.

Champion's death after the Florida Classic football game in Orlando confirmed parents' worst fears and has sparked two criminal investigations and a national debate over how to stop hazing.

At FAMU, it's also fed a bitter battle of blame between Ammons and band director Julian White, whose attorney claims in a letter that FAMU administrators often met the problem with "reckless indifference" when White asked for help.

Other Sentinel findings include:

■ Champion, who was slated to become the band's top drum major next school year, resisted hazing and encouraged other band members not to give in to it. His vocal opposition could be one reason he was so brutally attacked, Christopher Chestnut, the Champion family's attorney, told the Sentinel. Others interviewed by the Sentinel said the same thing. It still has not been determined, however, whether Champion finally gave in to hazing on the day he was beaten to death, or whether he was attacked against his will, Chestnut said.

■ Some parents suspected band staff members of condoning hazing. A letter from

one parent suggests band director White did not trust some of the people under him to help eliminate hazing because they would expose the identities of students who came forward. "Dr. White has had to be creative in his handling of these complaints as staff and other leaders were defiant of his authority," parent Berlinda Johnson wrote to Ammons last semester.

■ Since 2004, White has suspended, terminated or put on probation at least 40 students from the band because of hazing allegations. That's the same year former band member Marcus Parker won \$1.8 million in a lawsuit against members of the band after he was paddled so hard during a 2001 hazing that he suffered kidney damage. In 1998, the year White became band director, clarinet player Ivery Luckey was paddled about 300 times during a hazing ritual and was hospitalized with kidney failure. He sued the school and settled for \$50,000.

■ Twenty-six of the suspensions meted out by White occurred in the days after freshman clarinet player Bria Hunter was hazed so severely that she was hospitalized with a broken leg Nov. 7 — just 12 days before the Classic. Those suspensions involved students in the clarinet and trombone sections of the band.

Repeated attempts to reach Ammons, White and other FAMU officials through emails, phone calls and text messages went unanswered. Last week, however, the university's board of trustees voted to ask a committee of national experts to study anti-hazing initiatives and recommend changes for the university.

For this article, the Sentinel requested all correspondence about hazing between Ammons and White during the past year. The university's response indicates very little communication between the two men during that time. White did copy Ammons on suspension letters to students, however.

'I am scared!'

There's little doubt among some parents about where the blame rests for Champion's death. They insist that their complaints to White, Ammons and other administrators about hazing were not taken seriously enough.

Two years ago, parent Cheryl Walker of St. Louis told the Sentinel, she warned Ammons in an email about the dangers of hazing. In the email, she described the abuse that her son was experiencing at the hands of upperclassmen in the band.

"He said, 'Momma, I am scared! We have to run off the field after practice so the upperclassmen and alumni won't beat us up and one day we ran and accidently left

one of the freshmen brothers on the field and they kicked him in his stomach,'" Walker wrote Ammons on Sept. 24, 2009, adding that her son would walk to meetings carrying a metal pipe to protect himself and had asked her to mail him Mace.

Her son ended up quitting the band and leaving FAMU. Walker said she met with Ammons and a representative from the department of student affairs, who said the school was aware of the problem.

"They knew, and they said they couldn't stop it," she told the Sentinel.

In an interview with the Sentinel, Felicia Fabre' said she, her husband and son met with White and the band staff Sept. 4, 2011, to discuss the harassment and ostracism her child experienced last year as a freshman saxophone player who refused to be hazed.

Marcus Fabre' had told his mother that he had been shunned by other band members because he had followed the university and band department policy of not engaging in hazing — either as a hazer or a victim.

Marcus' freshman year was spent as an outcast and object of ridicule, intimidation and derision.

"I didn't hang with anybody in the band. When band was over, that was the last they saw of me. I have other friends on campus," Marcus, 20, told the Sentinel.

While he was never physically harassed, Marcus said, his saxophone was destroyed in retaliation for his refusal to go along with hazing.

When the ostracism continued during Marcus' sophomore year, Felicia Fabre warned White that hazing eventually would lead to tragedy and threaten the prestige the Marching 100 band had worked so hard to achieve.

"I told him, 'If you don't do more to stop this, somebody is going to get killed and wash away everything you've worked for in the band,'" said Fabre, who works in an Atlanta-area elementary school.

White's response, she said, was that the band has policies and procedures in place to address hazing — including the pledge form that each student signs at the beginning of the semester that states hazing is against the law and school rules.

"They just said they were doing what they could. They had things in place," Fabre said. "They have a paper trail to cover their behinds."

Following the meeting, nothing changed. Still, her son refused to quit the band and lose his scholarship.

Like others, Paulette Hilton did not feel that her complaints about hazing were taken seriously. In 2009, she reported that her nephew had been hazed and that she knew of several other band members who were beaten and humiliated.

She was so frustrated by the university's response that she told an administrator that his e-mail "reminds me of what a plantation owner would say."

More complaints

After Champion's death, Ammons moved to fire White and asked for an inquiry to "determine if there are any unauthorized and questionable activities associated with the culture of the Marching 100 ..."

White has said he received little support from the administration in battling hazing at FAMU. A letter from his attorney to Ammons outlines repeated steps White has taken during more than 20 years to fight hazing.

"From an administrative standpoint, however, hazing within the Marching 100 has often been met with reckless indifference by White's superior officers who often ignored his requests for assistance or, who privately lauded his decisions to suspend members from the band for hazing while failing to ensure that hazers were either charged with applicable criminal offenses or expelled as students from the university," attorney Chuck Hobbs wrote.

In the seven-page letter, Hobbs also writes that Champion's death could have been prevented if the university had suspended the entire 420-member band before the Florida Classic.

The letter goes on to suggest that the “appearance of financial gain” — the Florida Classic is a major fundraiser for the university — “may have impacted” the decision by White’s bosses not to suspended the band.

Former and current band members disagree about whether White could have done more.

Sebastian Alexander-Chambers made a YouTube video to share his thoughts on the hazing controversy and explain why he thinks White should be held accountable.

In the video Alexander-Chambers identifies himself as a FAMU alumnus who left the band because of the hazing he experienced in 1999.

He said he and other newer students in the sousaphone, French horn and baritone sections would be hit on the knuckles with metal mouthpieces by upperclassmen every time they missed a note during practice.

“I regret that I was not strong enough to say, ‘Look, I’m going to continue and be a part of this organization, but I’m going to be a part of it on my terms, not on your terms,’ ” he said.

In a follow-up interview, the sousaphone player said, “I still do believe we have the baddest band in the land. You can still love people but hate the things they do.”

Meanwhile, more reports of hazing keep coming. Since Champion’s death, FAMU student media and alumni

have launched a blog to collect hazing stories from current students and alumni.

As of early December, the group had collected almost 30 hazing reports involving the band and other campus organizations.

A member of the Marching 100 from 1980 wrote on the blog: “I was punched in the chest. I was verbally threatened many times. I heard a girl scream and saw a freshman band sister, saxophone player being dragged across the patch by her hair late one night after band practice.”

A current band member wrote: “I was made fun of. I walked home countless nights because no one would take me home. I was called out of my name every day and ostracized because I said no. ... Because I wouldn’t be hazed, my section would not let me march on the field and told me I was irrelevant and bad. They also made me give them part of my allocation money.”

Walker, the parent from St. Louis, said she told Ammons she could help him root out the hazers and end the tradition if the school would provide her with a list of the students who had left the band and gave up their scholarships.

“It was to talk to those students to see who drove them away, who attacked or hazed you to walk away from your scholarships, your music, your dreams, from the school you wanted to graduate from,” Walker said. “My

heart goes out to those who have left the band never to return. We work so hard to get our sons on a black campus and you have the gall to drive them away.”

But she never heard from the president or the student affairs official again, Walker said.

“We wouldn’t be here if they had listened to me in 2009,” she said.

Staff writer Coley Harvey contributed to this report.