

Records point to more FAMU hazing

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Former Florida A&M University student Bria Hunter complained to a member of the Marching 100's staff about being hazed and beaten by band members just days before another attack left her with a broken leg and weeks before the killing of drum major Robert Champion, according to campus-police documents.

The documents, provided to the Orlando Sentinel after repeated public-records requests, also show that university police investigated at least 10 complaints of hazing involving the band between August 2007 and Nov. 19, 2011, when Champion was beaten to death during a hazing in Orlando.

Hunter, 18, who has since left FAMU and given up an \$82,000 scholarship, told police that she complained to band employee Donald Beckwith, who is a senior equipment manager. She said she told Beckwith about being "battered" earlier in the semester during an initiation by a group affiliated with the band called the Red Dawg Order.

According to police, Beckwith said he "was not aware of the incident concerning Ms.

Hunter." It's unclear whether he was referring to the hazing she suffered or the conversation she reportedly had with him. Beckwith, 55, who has been working for the university for 27 years, would not comment for this article.

Neither Hunter nor her lawyer would comment either.

Hunter told police the conversation took place around Oct. 22, while the school's famed marching band was on a trip to South Carolina.

Chuck Hobbs, an attorney for longtime band director Julian White, said that if Beckwith heard a complaint about hazing, he should have reported it.

“Protocol dictates that band staff, upon receiving reports of hazing, are required to report them to Dr. White, who immediately reports any alleged incidents to FAMU police,” said Hobbs, who added that White was not informed of any hazing involving Hunter until her parents contacted him about her injuries in November.

After the band returned from South Carolina, Hunter was repeatedly punched so hard in the thighs during hazing events on Oct. 31 and early November that she went to the hospital with a broken leg, blood clots and bone bruising. In December — after three FAMU students were charged with her hazing — Hunter’s attorney announced that she intends to sue the university in Tallahassee.

The previous hazing Hunter reported is among a host of other details included in the police records that FAMU released to the Sentinel this week.

Although some of those documents are vague and many are incomplete, they offer additional insight into the types of hazing that band members reported suffering in the years before Champion was punched, kicked and deprived of oxygen during hazing rituals aboard a charter bus in Orlando after the Florida Classic football game. His death is still under investigation.

On Aug. 25, 2007, for example, a clarinetist’s mother complained to police that her daughter was taken to a hospital after being hit with a clothes hanger and other items during band practice. On Aug. 31, 2007, a freshman reported being hit on the elbows with the metal portion of a musical instrument’s mouthpiece by two senior band members.

It’s unclear whether anyone was disciplined for the Aug. 25 incident, but two seniors were suspended from the band after the Aug. 31 report, records show. Two people also were later arrested in connection with the second hazing.

On Sept. 18, 2007, several freshman band members were pressed by upperclassmen to visit another student’s dorm room and tell him to leave the band. One of the young men was arrested and charged with battery after he hit the student twice in the face, called him “soft,” used a racial slur and demanded he quit, police records show.

The newly released reports also provide further evidence of FAMU’s ongoing struggle with hazing despite repeated injuries, previous lawsuits and school officials’ efforts to warn band members that the practice was illegal.

One investigation was prompted by a letter from university President James Ammons’ office in late 2007, although the result of that review was not provided by FAMU.

Eric Rombach-Kendall, president of the College Band Directors National Association, said the police reports and White’s decision to suspend about 30 students immediately before the Florida Classic because of hazing indicate a lack of control.

“If I had suspended 30 band members because of my concerns about hazing ... I would demand that they [top administrators] support me on this,” said Rombach-Kendall, band director at the University of New Mexico. “It’s not like suspending one or two band members. Thirty suggests there was a culture there that Mr. White was not able to wholly control on his own.”

Hobbs, White’s attorney, said in a letter to Ammons after Champion’s death that hazing had been met with “reckless indifference by White’s superior officers who often ignored his requests for assistance.”

Some parents, however, suspected members of White's staff of condoning hazing. One parent wrote to Ammons last year that 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. "In one conversation with me," the parent wrote, "Dr. White stated that he could not trust the people under him with confidential information ..."

Meanwhile, FAMU administrators have ramped up efforts to ensure students are aware of the

dangers and ramifications of the practice.

Just weeks ago, Ammons announced he was canceling FAMU's Summer Band Camp and suspending recruitment and initiation events for all student organizations until the fall 2012 semester. The university recently formed a committee of national experts to help it figure out how to fight hazing.

Hank Nuwer, a journalism professor who has written four books on hazing and spent decades analyzing hazing cases, called the FAMU band "both a sacred cow and cash cow." Schools will take hazing crimes more seriously, he said, if they are required to monitor hazing cases and report them as part of their campus crime statistics.

"Over the years, a number of parents and some students have complained that their complaints have fallen on deaf ears when they go to an administrator. Or nothing is done and the victim is asked to furnish more proof, or led to believe he or she is the problem here, and not the person hazing," Nuwer said.

"Mandatory reporting of hazing, I'm confident, will give the public a clearer idea of how great the problem is and who are the worst offenders."

Excerpt of a narrative report submitted to FAMU police:

Ms. Hunter stated that the initiation initial process started sometime during the month of September 2011 and that sometime prior to the band traveling to the South Carolina football game she was battered by those same individuals identified in this report. Ms. Hunter stated that she informed Mr. Donald Beckwith, FAMU Band employee of the incident and that the conversation between the two took place in South Carolina. Contact was made with Mr. Beckwith and he advised that he was not aware of the incident concerning Ms. Hunter. This officer observed several bruises that were black and purple in color on both of Ms. Hunter's thighs. This officer also observed that Ms. Hunter had trouble standing and walking as a result of her injuries. Ms. Hunter was transported to Tallahassee Memorial Hospital for medical attention.