

Death of a Fraternity Script

<i>This script is adapted from "Death of a Fraternity" originally created by David Westol based on a chapter at Michigan State University.</i>	
Supplies	Delta Chi or college/university flag (depending on size of the group, multiple flags may be needed)
Room Setup	Session should be conducted by at least two chapter officers, ideally the "A" and the "B". One will need to serve as a narrator, and the other will read the words any time "Tom Johnson" is speaking. Associate Members should gather around the flag(s), holding onto it with one hand so it is strong, taut, and off the ground. As the story is read, the AMC should tap the shoulder of an Associate Member anytime the word "Tap" appears in the script (this should not be said out loud). If a shoulder is tapped, that person should let go of the flag and return to their seat.

BULLETTIN: January 20, 2009

The Delta Chi Fraternity at State University died today. Death was attributed to a lack of funds and interest. Surviving are twenty brothers, a flag, and two large coats of arms. Funeral arrangements were not immediately available.

Tom Johnson, the last president of the State Chapter, sat in a wicker rocking chair in his comfortable off-campus apartment and talked about his fraternity and why it died.

"It's hard, really hard to believe it's actually gone," he said, rocking slowly back and forth. "The 'Rules of the Game' say when you fight and struggle for something you believe in, then you'll win. We didn't."

I guess you could say our troubles began about the same time they did for everyone else in the autumn of 2005," he continued. "I had joined the year before, and that was my first term in the house. I guess it wasn't the best time to get in."

The Fall term of 2005 was a bad time for all fraternities. The Greek system, long the recognized way of getting through college while living the "good life," was suffering from a general lack of interest by the student body at State. For many years, membership in a fraternity had been the highest possible status attainable by young college men. At State, as well as other universities, fraternity men were the leaders in student government, the athletes, and the social lions. Fraternities were the only alternative to the dorms, for all practical purposes, and the Greek System dominated campus life in almost every facet.

However, by the mid-2000s, a change was becoming apparent. After a student died at one house, the university enacted a series of restrictions on fraternities. The chapters, in response, left campus, creating their own off-campus Interfraternity Council. The culture changed. The men who wanted to join Greek Life wanted to join for the parties, and the alcohol, not for the brotherhood.

Fall term, 2005, was the last term, according to older Greeks at State, when Rush brought out a respectable showing of men interested in joining a fraternity. In previous years, it was not uncommon to entertain as many as 350-400 men per night at a large house. In the winter of 2005, most houses recorded nightly rushes of 35-40, sometimes fewer.

Another factor that Fall was the emergence of the “party guys” as the dominant group in the fraternity. So-called because of their penchant for parties and good times, but little else that was constructive, they became, according to Johnson, the rule rather than the exception in the chapter. The new Associate Members, accordingly, looked up to them as the best example of a Delta Chi and followed their lead.

“Every chapter,” Johnson noted, “has party guys in a minority.” They add some depth and balance to the group. When they become the majority, however, negative forces are set in motion. “The result was that we kept developing more and more guys who looked to the fraternity as a good time and nothing else,” Johnson said.

TAP

Still, another factor in the beginnings of the Delta Chi downfall was the easing of standards for entry. Many fraternities, faced with the recruitment and activation of a large pledge class or the possibility of going under, eased or eliminated entire requirements for activation into the fraternity. Delta Chi followed suit, to the detriment of the Associate Member program and eventually the chapter. “By eliminating much of the work and knowledge requirements,” Johnson said, “the pride and feeling that you have had to work and sweat for something was also eliminated, resulting in a lack of spirit and feeling of accomplishment once the Associate Member period had ended.” Johnson stubbed out a Marlboro in the already overflowing ashtray in front of him.

By spring term of ‘06, though, things had changed. You couldn’t really put your finger on it, but the differences were there. One change was the retirement of the housemother, at the end of the winter term. The effects were subtle, but noticeable, as manners deteriorated at dinner, the traditional fraternity song at the end of a meal became history, and the general volume of noise rose in the house. A house father was hired for the spring term but failed to have the desired effect, and in the interest of money, was not rehired the next fall.

TAP

Associate Member programs became more lax term by term. Spring term of 2006, the AMC sat down with the good-sized class and asked them, “What do you guys think you should have to do in order to go active?” “We lost about half of those guys,” Johnson grimaced. “But then, can you blame them? What kind of AM program is that?”

At the end of the spring term, 2006; Delta Chi outwardly appeared to be in good shape. Inwardly the cracks were beginning to appear. The physical shape of the house was poor, dangerous cliques had formed with definite lines among brothers, and financial responsibilities were beginning to be regarded as a joke. Guys kept saying, "Wait until next year, we'll be better." We had a lot of new guys moving in, and we still had some guys who cared about the house, who would pick up after the others and carry the responsibilities.

The Fall term of 2006, however, brought new troubles to Delta Chi. Rush was "way, way, down," according to Johnson and the few men who did come through the house seemed unimpressed. A small AM class was formed, but again, the mortality rate of AMs dropping out was over fifty percent. In addition, relations within the house were strained. Many fraternities, faced with the possibility of going under, eased or eliminated entire requirements for activation in the fraternity.

TAP

People seemed to forget about consideration, other people; brotherhood if you want to label it. Guys would have their girlfriends up in their rooms, and their roommates would burst through the door half-drunk, yelling, banging on the walls, and stuff like that. You couldn't study around there, people had stereos up loud, and there always seemed to be some commotion going on."

Fraternity traditions continued to fall victim to the efforts to streamline the AM Process and make the house easier to live in, with less complication. "I always figured we had a pretty tight house, you know, in comparison with the others at State." Take away the traditions, all of them, and as Tom Johnson and Delta Chi found, only the house and some guys living in it are left. The idealism, the goal, the "brotherhood," the feelings of belonging after accomplishing the same thing that others for years and years have accomplished are gone.

TAP

Leadership was another problem. The president elected that fall term was, as Johnson put it, a "good guy, a good leader." But in the winter term of 2007, he left to student teach. His replacement was a second-term active who had moved into the house just that fall. He was young, naïve, and inexperienced in the position. He was unable to cope with the pressures that were to bear upon him in the following terms, resulting in a loss of confidence in house leadership at the very time strong and efficient people were needed to put Delta Chi back on its financial feet.

Johnson, by now the unofficial leader of the element of the chapter that saw problems developing, tried to raise enough support to have the president replaced with someone with more experience and ability. He failed. Many of the brothers felt that taking away the young president's position would hurt him and alienate him from the house, and thus he stayed on.

TAP

By now, financial problems were plaguing the troubled chapter. In addition, the house had been built several years previous, and the entire structure had been remortgaged, resulting in a higher house bill. With the decline in the number of men in the house and the irresponsibility of brothers in payment of bills, the financial problems were compounded.

“The last meeting of the spring term of ‘07 was a real zoo. Things came to a head, I guess, and you could have heard the shouting across campus. Some of the stuff was cleared up and we made plans for the coming year to be kind of a building year for the house, with a return as far as possible to the old days. I guess it sounds kind of funny now, but then things seemed to be shaping up a little.”

The young ex-president leaned forward, gesturing with his hands. “We weren’t even sure whether we could open the house that fall, because we wouldn’t have enough guys to keep the bills down, to break even, much less make a profit. But some of the upperclassmen said they’d stick it out, for another year, for the fraternity. It made me feel good to hear stuff like that. It was the old Delta Chi spirit, you know?”

TAP

The fall rush was planned in detail. Meetings were held that summer, work committees were named to clean the house and yard, and advertising space was purchased in the University newspaper. “Only one thing went wrong,” Johnson said. No one came through recruitment. “We should have figured, but nobody really thought that things had changed that much. We just thought that if we did things like we had done them before, then everything would be okay, back in order again.

By then no number of posters or ads would bring people through rush, you had to have the dorm contacts and go out and get the potential new members. We didn’t have the horses.” Johnson spoke softly, the words coming slowly, carefully, as though he was unwrapping an old wound.

The fall of 2007 was “an abomination,” he said. Although a few people eventually came through the house, due to frantic efforts by Johnson and several others, only two Associate Members joined. It was a heavy blow to the sagging chapter spirit, and its effects were felt to the end of the term. Noise and lack of consideration for others in the house reached monumental proportions. Many of the seniors who volunteered to live in the house for the entire year called it quits after final exams in December of 2007. “They were just bummed out with the whole thing, and no amount of talking, promises, or threats would make them change their minds,” Johnson said.

TAP

The alumni advisor, who had maintained casual relations with the fraternity over the past three years, now said they had to pay off some of the debts run up over the ‘06 - ‘07 school year. With even fewer brothers in the house, with the possibility of raising the house bill and forcing even more out, with the mortgage payments due and no immediate source of money available, the fraternity fractionalized and split up, with rush at a standstill, the Delta Chi’s made the only possible decision: to sell the house.

The rest of the story is a common cause and effect. Many of the brothers moved into an apartment complex east of the fraternity house. Some didn't. Others resigned. Those that moved into the apartments tried to maintain the chapter's integrity but found too many restrictions, and too many walls.

Rush was attempted in the spring of 2008 but failed miserably. Johnson, who had been elected the previous fall, decided to try and rally the brothers who were left for one more crack at rush in the fall of '08. It failed again.

TAP

On January 20th, 2009, after a hazing and vandalism scandal from the chapter making the news, Johnson and the 19 remaining brothers voted the fraternity out of existence. Their charter remains with the university, to be used again perhaps someday in the future when another group of young men will want to form a chapter of Delta Chi at State University. The big colonial-style house still stands at the northwest corner of Main Street and Twelfth Avenue, but the tasteful gray paint has peeled away, leaving ragged patches of bare, worn wood. The red-trimmed shutters hang at crazy angles, with slats broken or missing, and most of the windows are shattered or cracked. The lawn is overgrown with weeds and strewn with litter.

Students with classes nearby use the potholed and dusty parking lot. The Delta Chi's thought that by letting the house fall to ruin, the City would change its zoning law and allow a gas station to be built on the corner, thus giving the fraternity about \$250,000 in payments to pay off debts and construct a new house to be used for parties, meetings, and social functions.

TAP

"The city hasn't backed off, though," Johnson said. "I'm not sure what we'll do with the old wreck now. I get sad every time I walk by it. I guess everyone does," he continued. "The guys who worked, who cared, sure, we got discouraged, wanted to quit, but we always figured we'd somehow pull it off, that it would never get this far. Only one thing went wrong," Johnson said. "No one came through recruitment."

Johnson rocks slowly now. His voice is thick and trails off at times.

"Sometimes I'll get a call from the police - they know me by now - and I'll go over to the house; it'll be around four in the morning and there will be maybe three or four brothers, some of the guys who cared. They'll be drunk, back from the bars or a party, sitting on the living room floor singing old songs. I can't help it, I'll sit down with them, and we'll talk about the old I-Weeks, raids, parties, and the house."

The old Coat of Arms that used to hang above the fireplace is now gone. Johnson thinks it was stolen by another fraternity on campus. Johnson smiles quietly. "It's kind of ironic," he said. "I guess they figured we'd chase them and hassle them for it. I'm surprised they got it out of that wreck." The second, newer coat of arms is hidden deep within a Delta Chi's closet somewhere, but Johnson won't say where.

TAP

The reasons why Delta Chi folded - and there are many - could be written down and labeled like a diagnosis of a disease. Poor leadership. Lack of education for new members. The almost frantic cutting away of all traditions and ideals to appeal to more people. Division of the fraternity into separate, polarized cliques. Financial irresponsibility. Lack of good alumni relations and a strong, smart advisor to help them. Insufficient peer pressure and a lack of consideration. Hazing, drinking, and vandalism. And many more reasons, except one, for Tom Johnson and some of the brothers.

"I, well, if I had to do it all over again, I'd do it, because I think it was worth it, whether we lost or not," Johnson smiled sadly. "It's that old Delta Chi spirit, you know?"

TAP