

# 31<sup>st</sup> & Pearl

## Martha Saunders, Swisher Sweet

The thought of USM President Martha Saunders sitting around the Dome on Saturday amongst beer can-toting football fans who were smoking “small cigars” would be humorous if not for the “party school” fallout all around her. One would think that having a potentially underage *co-ed* bedridden over at Forrest General, suffering from an enlarged liver that resulted from an alleged hazing incident at Kappa Sigma *fraternity* house, would focus one’s attention far from game day/luxury suite revelry. If not that, how about the wake-up call that must have been the recently [sealed court settlement](#) with the family of a USM alumnus who died (summer of 2004) after playing a game of “beer pong” at the USM Sigma Nu fraternity house? Both of these stories were covered by *The Hattiesburg American’s* higher education reporter, Valerie Wells, who already has a budding career going solely due to her investigation of all sorts of problematic situations on the USM campus.

The latest story about the beer pong death at Sigma Nu is troubling for the USM family on any number of fronts. For one, the monetary settlement was sealed, and the plaintiff’s attorney told Wells that “[j]ustice was done.” These tidbits point toward a sizable six-figure sum, at minimum. We do know that as part of the settlement, USM established *and* funded a scholarship in the deceased alumnus’ name. The plaintiff’s attorney also told Wells that he was aware of the most recent binge-drinking fiasco at USM involving a Waveland co-ed, and that he empathized with her family. Perhaps the attorney put it best when he stated that schools like USM “must get control” of their “drinking problems.” If recent stories from *The Student Printz* and here at USMNEWS.net are indicative, Saunders et al. are doing anything but that. During her first year in office, alcohol-related USMPD citations rose by over 100%, while DUI citations rose by almost 500%.

Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Saunders may be moving to support the push to lower the legal drinking age to 18. Doing so will address some of the liability issues facing USM, but as far as heeding the advice of the experienced plaintiff’s counsel in the most recent court settlement at USM, it does little. For now, all living USM alumni must be content with the fact that the institution’s freshman class grew by 12% or so. Yet to do that, they may have to ignore the idea that the growth possibly resulted from the purely business strategy of appearing to be a party school.