

Can't Win For Losing More Bad News from USM, "Party School USA"

USM can't seem to win for losing these days. In her [4-Sept-08 article](#) for *The Hattiesburg American* entitled "Alleged hazing under review," *THA* higher education reporter, Valerie Wells, had the responsibility of telling Pine Belt area citizens that the party school environment at USM had taken a turn for the worse. According to Wells, an "alleged hazing incident at the Kappa Sigma fraternity house has left a student in intensive care at Forrest General Hospital." Though the USMPD was still investigating the incident at the time Wells filed her report, she was able to confirm that "[t]wo students involved were admitted to the hospital for treatment of alcohol poisoning."

USMPD Chief, Bob Hopkins, told Wells that the USMPD had an impressive list of witnesses, and that the agency had questioned a number of people about the incident. Most disturbing about the incident is that the student who remains hospitalized by events at the fraternity house is a co-ed -- the daughter of Leslie Besancon of Waveland. The elder Besancon told Wells that her daughter had been invited to join the Kappa Sigma little sisters group, and it was at an initiation event at the fraternity house that her daughter suffered alcohol poisoning. According to Besancon, the initiates, including Besancon's daughter, had their heads tilted back while Kappa Sigma's little sisters poured whiskey and vodka down their throats. And, it was attendees at the initiation who later found the younger Besancon on the side of the road. They transported her to Forrest General Hospital, where it was discovered that her blood-alcohol content was 0.47. As Wells indicates, this (0.47) is more than five times the legal limit of 0.08. Besancon's mother told Wells that the younger Besancon "is in septic shock and her liver is enlarged."

Sources tell USMNEWS.net that the USM central administrative structure is designed like a spider web, wherein accountability is difficult to pinpoint. Thus, it came as no surprise to them that when Wells located Trey Skaggs, Assistant Dean and Director of Greek Life, no information was uncovered. Instead, Skaggs told Wells that he is not in a position to comment on the matter. Wells also reports that employees in the Greek Life office also refused to comment, and that calls to the Kappa Sigma house went unanswered.

USM President, Martha Saunders, also did not comment for Wells' report, though she did release a prepared statement for the news media. According to Wells, that statement reads:

"Our students are our treasure, and we place their safety and well-being at the top of our list of priorities. Incidents such as what allegedly took place last week are unacceptable. Alcohol and drug education has long been a key element of our safety efforts at the university, and when an instance involving substance abuse occurs

we take it very seriously."

Saunders' statement, particularly the beginning, is bizarre to say the least. Sources indicate that it also rings hollow. The timing of events could also be troubling, given recent reports in *THA* and at USMNEWS.net indicating that drunken revelry was the order of the day all over campus on 30-August-08, the weekend the "hazing episode" was alleged to have occurred. Another aspect of the story, one not emphasized by Wells, is the likelihood that the younger Besancon is under the legal age of 21. Students at the initiation stage in the Greek system are most likely to be among the younger portion of the USM student body, so the binge drinking that allegedly characterized the whole episode likely involved underage drinking.

The whole episode is bad, and it promises to get even worse. Readers of *THA* who have taken the time to comment (online) to Wells' article are stating that the Kappa Sigmas at USM have had a long history of inappropriate behavior. Some are writing on *THA's* website that the fraternity was involved in something akin to a "gang rape" in recent years. It remains to be seen how the two events are linked together, if at all, to build a case for holding the group "harshly accountable," to use VP for Student Affairs, Joe Paul's, words.

Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Saunders' seemingly inattentive stance toward student problems on campus, which are very *real*, is likely the result of her tunnel vision toward faculty problems that are, at best, *imagined*. Given how badly things are going on the student body front at USM, one can only wonder how terribly things must be going for items that are further down on Saunders' priority list.