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# The Company He Kept: The Aftermath of a Student Death at SUNY Plattsburgh

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*The Company He Kept: The Aftermath of a Student Death at SUNY Plattsburgh*

Jacob Goldblum

History 485-Neuhaus

9 May 2014

*Finding Aid for Interview with Allison Swick-Duttine*

**Thesis:** The hazing death of Walter Dean Jennings in 2003 undoubtedly had a profound impact on the SUNY Plattsburgh community. However, the perceptions held by campus administrators about how the community was affected differ significantly, with the position they hold/held playing an important role in their interpretation of the consequences.

My (Jake Goldblum) first interview was conducted with Allison Swick-Duttine in her office in the Angell College Center on March 7th, 2014 and the entire interview was recorded on a smartphone. Swick-Duttine is the Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life at Plattsburgh, and the interview was conducted in her office in the on campus. She has worked at SUNY Plattsburgh in this position since 1998, and before that received her masters and bachelor's degrees from Marshall University in West Virginia. She grew up in West Virginia as well. Her interview was 32 minutes long and the topics that were covered are as follows (alphabetical order):

Alcohol on Plattsburgh campus

Education

Selling

Open parties

Alumni

72 Broad Street (Former Psi Epsilon Chi house)

Off-Campus Housing

SUNY Plattsburgh Campus administration

College President

Dean of Students 2003 (Bill Laundry)

Vice-President of Student Affairs 2003 (Bill Laundry)

University Police

Clinton Dining Hall

Effect on the SUNY Plattsburgh Community

Fraternal values

Protests

Vigil

Being Informed of Incident

Fraternity Sorority Life Office

Committees

Peer Facilitators

Undergraduate Workers

Governance Councils

Greek Council (1990's)

Interfraternity Council

Intersorority Association

PanHellenic Council

President's Council

Greek Life Student Leaders (SUNY Plattsburgh)

Directing community growth

Leading campus initiatives

Hazing

Funnels

Pledging

“Water Torture”

Hospitals

Burlington Hospital

Champlain Valley Physician's Hospital

Jennings, Walter Dean (2003)

Hazing death of

Reaction to death

Lack of Student Engagement in Social Issues

Alcohol education

Anti-Hazing education

Sexual assault prevention

Mountain Lake PBS

Documentary

Negative Image of Campus

Hazing Death

Newspaper coverage

Personal Effect the Incident had on Swick-Duttine

Career Path

Presenting at national conferences

Acting as a resource for other campuses

Personal Reactions to Incident

Positions Held

Director of Fraternity/Sorority Life

Coordinator of Greek Affairs and Off-Campus Concerns

Multicultural Alliance

President Hazingprevention.org

Sexual Assault Prevention

Unrecognized Organizations (i.e. Groups officially disavowed by college)

College Recognition

Judicial Affairs

Local Organization

Psi Epsilon Chi

Policy against joining (2001)

*Transcription of Interview with Allison Swick-Duttine*

**Interviewer:** Alright, so today is March 7th, 2014 and I am with Allison Swick-Duttine today, and thank you for being with us. Uh, Allison, to get us started do you think you could share with me some information about your background, educational background, and your experiences here at SUNY Plattsburgh?

**Allison Swick-Duttine** Sure. Um, well my educational background is, I, um, graduated with a Bachelors in magazine journalism, and a masters in student affairs counseling from Marshall University in West Virginia. Um, I was actually born and raised in West Virginia, so SUNY Plattsburgh was my first job out of grad school, I started in October 1998 and was hired as the Coordinator of Greek Affairs and Off Campus Concerns, was the title at the time. That's evolved over the years, um so that now my title is Director of Fraternity and sorority Life, um although, I do have additional responsibilities advising the Multicultural Alliance in addition to working with the fraternity/sorority community.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Do you think you could, um, elaborate a bit on some of your responsibilities as Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life?

**ASD:** Well, I run the fraternity center for fraternity and sorority life. Um which is a completely student, um, run office. I'm the only professional staff member, with nine undergraduate students, and a bunch of undergraduate student volunteers. Um, I advise the Interfraternity Council, and the Intersorority Association, which are the governance councils for the fraternity and sorority community, and their sub-committees. Um, I work with twenty-one fraternities and sororities and their advisors, um to help them with leadership programing, values and purpose clarification, um troubleshooting problem situations, training their advisors to, um, help support

them effectively, um, and then I also, um, work with three fraternity/sorority honor societies, in addition to our fraternity/sorority Peer Facilitators. Um, so that's what I do in as nutshell, um, what that looks like on a day-to-day basis is a lot more complex than that, but those are basically my duties, um, is really managing an entire fraternity and sorority community, and providing education to them to fulfill their purpose and values as an organization.

**Interviewer:** Great. Thank you. Sounds like there's a lot of, a lot of stuff going on there. Um, so as you know, the purpose of this interview is to get your perspective on how the hazing death of Walter Dean Jennings, in 2003, um how that affected the SUNY Plattsburgh community. Um, so, so in your opinion, and of course with you being the Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life, you would know best. In your opinion, what was the state of fraternity/sorority life prior to the incident?

**ASD:** Uh, I think the community was evolving before I started working here, in 1998 there was a task force that was assembled by the college president and the vice-president of student affairs, because they felt that the fraternity and sorority community was in a crisis situation, and that there were some sweeping changes that needed to occur on campus, and so there was a task force that was assembled in the early-90's, who really did a lot of policy changes and changed some of the structure on how the college was going to work with fraternities and sororities. Um, so one of the things that came out of that task force, was the creation of a full-time position to work with fraternities and sororities, um, which was me. Um, so I think, [thinks for a moment silently,] like you said earlier, I started here in October of 1998, um, and really wasn't prepared for the state of the community that it was in. Um, there was a huge issue with hazing, there was a huge issue with, um, organizations not really knowing why they existed-the purpose of their organizations really *was* [her emphasis] to throw parties. Students would articulate that. That they weren't here

to, um, do community service, or to, um, advance their members scholastically, or uh, to build a community with the other fraternities and sororities, or to be leaders on campus. I mean a lot of them would articulate that in their mind, [that] that was not the purpose of a fraternity or sorority.

Um, so that coupled with the issue of groups that were shutdown, um that continued to operate, and the groups supporting that, still having events with them, and including them as part of their community, um, there was still a lot of work to be done. However, I would also say, there wasn't a governance structure when I started working here. Um, there had been a Greek Council at one point, that the college had worked towards breaking apart into little single-sexed governance units. Um, and so when I got here the concept of the Interfraternity Council had been started, but the group had never met before. Um, and then there was a Panhellenic Council, a local sorority council. So, the sororities were divided into two separate councils. Um, so I think a lot evolved over five years. I think, um, we really started to have conversations about fraternal values and purpose. Um, the [fraternity/sorority] community started doing a lot more things together, um, and being supportive of each other, the governance councils started to become, um, at least somewhat functional, and in fact, the Interfraternity Council had worked with consultants, and me, and administrators on campus to develop a strategy for getting rid of the unrecognized, former fraternities, and so, they had actually, created, a, um, agreement with most of the sororities that if they, the sororities, were having social events with unrecognized groups, then they would not have social events with them. Um, so I think there was a lot of progress, we were starting to see in the fraternity/sorority community.

Fortunately, in fact, another thing I'll mention is, the Interfraternity Council spearheaded, um, the fact that, now the college sends out a letter every year to freshman parents, particularly if there is an unrecognized group, it says that in the letter. The Interfraternity Council was the one

that initially sent that very first letter out, in probably about 2000-probably about 2001, I think maybe, was the first time that letter went out. Um, so they were being pretty proactive at solving that problem, and then after the first year, the college took over and agreed to send that letter out. Um, so they really were being the leaders and trying to solve that issue.

**Interviewer:** [Clears throat.] Great. Um, so [clears throat,] you mentioned the concept of an unrecognized organization. Can you expand a little bit on what an unrecognized organization is?

**ASD:** Um, we had two unrecognized organizations, when I worked here... or when I started working here. One of them was a fraternity that had lost college and national recognition. Um, and the other was a local fraternity that had lost college recognition. They had gone through the judicial system enough times and had done things egregious enough for the college to say they can no longer be a part of the community. So, they had broken, um, the fraternal standards and the college standards. Um, and so, the problem being is that both of those groups had housing owned by alumni, um, and so they continued to live in the housing and continued to operate, call themselves by the name of the organization. So, really for them business went on as usual, because like I said, the culture was such at the time that the fraternities defined their purpose as being a place for people to go to have parties, so these groups just continued to do that. There really wasn't a whole lot that they lost by being unrecognized on campus. So, that's what we had to work a lot on over the years, was really building value in fraternities wanting to be part of campus community.

**Interviewer:** Great. Thank you. Um, and was [clears throat,] and at that point, was one of those unrecognized groups Psi Epsilon Chi?

**ASD:** Yeah. Yes that was the local organization that had lost recognition.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Um, great. Do you think you could tell me a little bit more about Psi Epsilon Chi, and the reasons why they became an unrecognized organization, and potentially, their functions afterwards?

**ASD:** Um, I wasn't here when that group was closed. I honestly can't tell you for sure why they were unrecognized. Um, I'm pretty confident it had something to do with alcohol sales, selling alcohol without a license, repeatedly, not just doing that one time. Um, but I am not-I can't say beyond the shadow of a doubt that's why that was- why they were unrecognized. Um, I also don't really know a whole lot about them. Other than they were a local organization, founded at SUNY Plattsburgh, they only existed at this campus. Um, they lived at a house their alumni had bought for them on Broad Street, so um, they had a pretty active alumni group that supported what they were doing. Um, which, actually became pretty problematic for those alumni when the death occurred. So, really that's all I can tell you about the group, because I don't have a lot- I don't know a lot about their history on campus, because they were gone- I believe they were shut down the semester before I started working at Plattsburgh.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So, um, Walter Dean Jennings, uh as we...as you and I may know, was pledging this underground organization, this unrecognized organization, as you say. And, [clears throat] um, and all that I know about the situation is that he passed away, during one of their hazing practices. Um, from what you know about the incident, can you tell us a little bit about what happened, from your knowledge?

**ASD:** Um, I...and I'll admit a lot of my knowledge that I know actually comes from a documentary that was created, um, by Mountain Lake PBS. Um, but to my knowledge- I mean he... he was one of two students who were pledging-or who were left- pledging this

organization. I believe there were more who said they weren't going to go through the process anymore. Um, but, I think the fraternity members were using... were using water in lieu of alcohol, um, not that they weren't forcing them to consume alcohol, but they knew that drinking too much alcohol could kill you. So, they were substituting some of that with water, and so part of what they were doing was just making them chug water at all times. So, to my understanding Dean didn't feel well, and was being very lethargic and unresponsive, um, a little bit... I think kind of out of sorts, saying things that weren't making sense, and, um, to my understanding the members...or some of the members- took him to the hospital, dropped him off at the door step and just left him there in the emergency room. Um, and came back and cleaned up the house to try to get rid of evidence, of the funnels, and the vomit, and everything else that was in the house. Um, I also know, from talking to the chief of University Police, that when they were confronted, they told the hospital that he had eaten bad mayonnaise on a sandwich a Clinton Dining Hall, or somewhere on campus. Um, but the campus... or the hospital... realized that that could not be the case, because he actually had water coming out of his body everywhere. Um, so, I mean that's all- about all I know- about the incident, um, and what happened. But I do know he was transported to Burlington, um, because the hospital here wasn't prepared to handle that, and that's where he passed away, was in Burlington.

**Interviewer:** Wow. [Clears throat.] So, um, how did you initially...how were you initially informed about the incident, and-and, the death?

**ASD:** I actually was off from work, um, that day; I had taken a personal day. Um, and, I remember Bill Laundry the Vice-President for Student Affairs calling me, and saying we have had- we had a hazing incident. And it's not one of our recognized groups. But they don't think

the student is going to make it. Um, so I remember that vividly standing in my bedroom at home, getting that call from Bill [Laundry.]

**Interviewer:** And, um, can I ask what your initial reactions were?

**ASD:** [Shakes head.] Um... it's been a long time ago, I think your initial reaction is you just don't know what to think, that's information that is difficult to process. Because, you know, when you-when it's part of what you do every day- is to talk to students about the dangers of hazing, and um, to talk to them about what the purpose of fraternity and sorority is, and that that is counter to the principles and the values of the organization. Um, and then to turn around and see that that's happened on your campus it's just... it's just a lot of information to process. So, I just remember... being in shock. From that point, when you then start in the meetings and having, you know, talking to the students who were in the recognized organizations, about what- you know, how they're going to respond, and um, I have a colleague who I present on the topic of unrecognized groups with a lot who's, um, a judge. And, he always said that the newspaper's not going to put Unrecognized Former Fraternity Kills Student on the front page of the newspaper, because it doesn't fit and it doesn't sell papers. So, um what it will say is PSU Frat Kills Student. So, we knew that there were ramifications-or I knew there would be ramifications for the fraternity/sorority community, and that they had worked really, really hard to try to get rid of this group, and had worked really hard to get the college and the community on board with trying to say this is a problem. So, I knew it was really unfortunate cause I knew what the headline in the paper was going to be the next morning. Um, so you know, from having meetings with administration about what the college's response was needed be, to having, um, meetings and conversations with students about what their response should be then, and what they were

going to do in the future. Um, it all just kind of- it was just all a blur, I think after the initial moment.

**Interviewer:** And, [clears throat] you spoke briefly about, um the ramifications for the fraternity/sorority community. Um, in your opinion, what were some of those ramifications that popped up after the incident?

**ASD:** [Pauses to think, looks around.] I think... I mean a lot of assumptions that that's what the norm is in our fraternities and sororities that were recognized, that that's what they do. Um, and that we should get rid of all of them, because this is going to happen again. So, I think that um, there were a lot of public relations types of ramifications, from people who don't understand what fraternity is supposed to be about. Um, and just making assumptions um that that is what they're about. Um, fraternities and sororities, or the leadership of the fraternities and sororities, made the decision that they were going to, uh, hold a memorial, the campus memorial for Dean. Um, and got a lot of criticism for that too, because then they were criticized for, [pause] I guess it's hard to explain what they were criticized for, but people were turning around and saying, Well now you're making it look like they were part of your community. When they were just trying to do a good thing for a student who had died. So, they were doing something that was just, um, very kind, and caring, and got a lot of criticism, I think for that as well. So, [chuckles] I don't remember what your initial question was.

**Interviewer:** [Chuckles] You answered it.

**ASD:** [Laughs.] Okay.

**Interviewer:** So, thank you. Um... so moving forward as a campus and as a community, what changes and what policies were instituted... it could be, you know formal policies, or it could be

informal precedent type things, but what things were instituted by administration, but also by the students, um, to prevent this from happening again? Or to address it.

**ASD:** Honestly, I can tell you there wasn't anything that was instituted, because I think that everything we should have done, they were already doing and working on. You know, unfortunately, um... it may have been a little bit too late. I mean obviously there were students who were knew what the college's stance was on unrecognized groups and continued to join those organizations nevertheless, but I think, the college had already started doing the letters to parents, the policy that students aren't allowed to join groups that have lost recognition for violation of college policy, you know, um, the M.O.U between fraternities and sororities that they wouldn't support unrecognized groups. Um, you know we did a lot, we had already started doing a lot of education with residence life staff, with the athletic teams, um, a lot of communication with the city police on how they could help be part of... helping us collect information so we could hold those students accountable.

Um, so all those pieces were in place by the time this happened, so there were no new policies that were created as a result. I think that it just, unfortunately gave people-people never think this is going to happen to them, so you can do anti-hazing education, or alcohol education, or sexual assault prevention education, and students sit there and they listen to it, but they don't think that it's ever going to be relevant to them, and this was the case where the conversation the fraternity/sorority community had been having for three or four years finally became very real, because what they were afraid was going to happen happened. So, I think that that accelerated, probably, a lot of the change that happened in the community, um, because people realized it can happen on our campus, and it did happen on our campus. Um, but I don't think-I think a lot of things changed as a result I don't think that we changed anything, um... because I feel I think the

one thing I feel really good about in the whole situation, is that we *were* [her emphasis] addressing the issue, you know, it's not like we had a death and then we had to think Oh, we should do this, this, this, and this. We were doing all that stuff beforehand.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So, so there will be a follow up to this one, but ultimately, how do you think that-how do you feel that you personally, were affected by the incident?

**ASD:** [Long pause.] Um, [chuckles] I think that I... it strengthened my resolve. I've always been an anti-hazing advocate, um, I've always been pretty vocal about hazing having no place, particularly in a fraternity or sorority, it wasn't a part of my experience joining a sorority. So, I've always found it hard to understand why students feel like that has to be a part of the process for them to fit into an organization. But I think, what this did was actually; kind of carve some... a career path for me. I didn't start this job thinking that people would call this campus all the time, or we would be referred to from national experts, that national experts would refer campuses to us to ask us how to handle this issue about unrecognized organizations. Um, or you know, I never expected to be, kind of, a national leader in hazing prevention. Um, but I started getting lots of calls to serve on national committees, um, I think if anything, as a result of this happening, and as a result of people looking to us to help them understand how to handle these similar situations, it's just strengthened my resolve. I've been the president of Hazingprevention.org, which is an organization to empower students to prevent hazing on college and university campuses, um, you know, I've presented at national conferences um, on the issue of hazing prevention and unrecognized organizations. So, every time I present that, and every time I have that conversation it strengthens my resolve that we need to get to the bottom of this issue, not just at Plattsburgh but nationally.

**Interviewer:** Great. Um, so, and to follow up, ultimately, how do you feel the SUNY Plattsburgh community was affected by this event?

**ASD:** [Long pause.] Um, honestly I feel like the community-there were people who you know, protested and were really vocal when it first happened, but that didn't sustain itself after the sensationalism of the trials and all that stuff was over. Um, I think one of the things that we do every year-or the fraternity/sorority community does- is hosts National Hazing Prevention Week, and hosts it in memory of Walter Dean Jennings, um, and have gotten some criticism from people about just let it go, like just stop talking about it so we can forget about it. But I think to forget about it is disrespectful to Dean, and it also paves the way for something to happen like that again. So, I don't know that the community, in my opinion, responded in anyway. Like, I don't think... I think the community would rather forget... um, and probably does forget, because there are people who move in and out of the community all the time but I think we have an opportunity as administrators on the campus to help students realize it did happen here, um, and if were not vigilant it can happen again.

**Interviewer:** Sure. And um, that's what we're trying to do with this project, is to not only commemorate the memory of what happened, but also of the experiences of the people who were directly involved.[Clears throat.] And do you think you could just share your feelings about the fraternity/sorority community currently? And the things that they're doing now?

**ASD:** You know I think the conversation in the fraternity/sorority community, I mean it's not that we don't talk about hazing, because we had a program last night about how to end hazing in the membership process. Um, but that's not the primary conversation, it's one thing to tell someone not to do it, but it's another to tell them what they can do instead. So, um, you know a

lot of the education and conversation really, is about organizational purpose and how does what fraternities and sororities do, on many levels, fit with who they say that they are. Um, we do the programming to help groups understand how to design effective and intentional membership experiences for their member, and I think the difference between now and thirteen years ago, or whatever it was-ten, eleven years ago- is that the fraternity/sorority community leads most of these initiatives. The program last night was facilitated by fraternity and sorority members, and the fraternity/sorority community created a hazing prevention committee, and um, the fraternity/sorority governance councils, um, are the ones that are having some really difficult conversations, that I don't know a lot of students are having, anywhere else on campus. So, I think there has been a complete evolution to, um, a lot of self-governance, and it's not perfect. We have to put a lot of issues in front of the fraternity/sorority community sometimes and say; now you have to handle this situation. But, they always seem to rise to the occasion, um so, I think the difference- that's the main difference, that's the core difference, is that the fraternity/sorority leaders are leading their own community, and they weren't doing that ten, fifteen years ago. Um, and there have been a lot of improvements as far as their commitment to, you know, the community through service and philanthropic fund raising, their GPA, you know, fifteen years ago the fraternity/sorority GPA was significantly lower than the all-campus average, now it's either at or above every semester. So, there's been a shift in the culture of fraternity/sorority life, and I think a lot of it is because, um, it's again, because of that what's the purpose, because if you can't... if you join an organization... I always tell students and they laugh- I'm like, you don't open a McDonald's franchise and sell tacos. That's not what McDonald's does. So, you can start a fraternity/sorority... you can't be in a fraternity/sorority

that says they stand for justice, or integrity, or excellence, or um, esteem or whatever it is and then do things, and have your members behave in ways that are counter to those espoused values.

So, that's a part of the common thread of our conversations now. Um, versus the first President's Council Meeting I ever had at SUNY Plattsburgh, when I was trying to talk just about some fundamental purposes of the fraternity/sorority community across the nation being friendship, scholarship, leadership, and service, and the presidents kind of revolted and said, that's not why we joined. That's not why were in fraternities and sororities. And I said, well, why? We're here to party and have a good time. That's a vast difference between what the reality is today. I'm not saying students who are in fraternities and sororities don't want to have a good time, but they're more in alignment with their actions, with what they should be as fraternal organizations.

**Interviewer:** Great. So, uh, is there anything that you would like to add to the interview that hasn't already been, uh touched upon?

**ASD:** [Short pause.]I can't think of anything else.

**Interviewer:** Ok. So, I think we have a very, a very dense conversation thus far. [Clears throat.] And so I'm going to take a look at the recording, and see what we have, but it seems like we're in good shape. But, if it seems like there's anything else I could potentially use, or potentially need expounding upon, I'll contact you about that. Other than that, I think you have answered the questions more than sufficiently. So, um if you don't have anything else?

**ASD:** Nope.

**Interviewer:** Great, thank you.

*Finding Aid for Interview with Bryan Hartman*

**Thesis:** The hazing death of Walter Dean Jennings in 2003 undoubtedly had a profound impact on the SUNY Plattsburgh community. However, the perceptions held by campus administrators about how the community was affected differ significantly, with the position they hold/held playing an important role in their interpretation of the consequences.

My (Jake Goldblum) second interview was with Bryan Hartman the current Vice-President of Student Affairs and the former Director of Housing of Residence Life. It was also conducted on March 7th, 2014 in his office in Kehoe Administration Building using a smartphone. Bryan grew up in Pennsylvania, and initially attended the University of Pittsburgh for a year then took a year and a half off and finally came to Plattsburgh in 1984. He graduated from Plattsburgh in 1987 and attended the University of Vermont for 2 years getting his master's degree. He began working at Plattsburgh in 1993. His interview was 55 minutes long. The topics that came up in his interview are as follows (alphabetical order):

Allison Swick-Duttine

Connections to national fraternity/sorority resources

Director of Fraternity/Sorority Life

Being informed of incident

Campus Administration (2003)

Director of Residence Life (Bryan Hartman)

Dean of Students (Bill Laundry)

Head of Judicial Affairs (Steve Matthews)

University Police

Vice-President of Student Affairs (Bill Laundry)

#### Crisis Management after Incident

Coordinating residence life staff to respond

Counseling services

Jennings' friendships/intimate relationships

#### Culture change at Plattsburgh

Accelerated by incident

Student self-regulation

Typically slow process

#### Educational Background

SUNY Plattsburgh

University of Pittsburgh

University of Vermont

#### Greek Governance Councils

Interfraternity Council

Intersorority Association

Hazing

Prevention

Water Intoxication

Hazingprevention.org

Hazing prevention week

Initial Reactions to Incident

Maturation of Greek Life at Plattsburgh

Organizations choose to not affiliate with unrecognized groups

Mount St. Mary's College Director of Student Activities (1991-1993)

Perception of Greek Life Prior to Incident

Personal Effect of Incident

Public Relations

Negative effect on Plattsburgh's image

Racism at Plattsburgh

Education

Forum

Michael Haynes

Prevention

Risky Behaviors

Alcohol consumption

Heroin overdoses (2014)

Service Programs

Alternative Break

AMERICORP

Community Service Scholarship

Project H.E.L.P.

Sexual Violence

Education

Prevention

Protests

Student Association

Senator

Off-Campus Concerns Board

Student Groups

*Cardinal Points*

PSTV

SUNY Plattsburgh

Unrecognized Organization (Groups officially disavowed by college)

Laundry's hesitancy to remove groups

Psi Epsilon Chi

Theta Kappa Beta

Psi Epsilon Chi

72 Broad Street

*Animal House*

## Transcription with Bryan Hartman

**Interviewer:** So Bryan, thanks for taking the time out of your day, uh for this interview, today is March Seventh, 2014 and I am with Bryan Hartman today. So, thank you for taking the time Bryan. So Bryan, before we get started do you think you can give me a quick background of, of yourself, your educational experience, and the positions you've held, or hold here at SUNY Plattsburgh.

**Bryan Hartman:** Sure. Uh, I guess how far back do you want me to go? I was a student here at SUNY Plattsburgh. I have a marketing degree from here. I was a transfer here. I first started out at the University of Pittsburgh, and dropped out of college for a year and a half before finding myself here. Then I graduated in '88, went on to pursue my master's in education at the University of Vermont, Higher Ed. and Student Affairs Administration. Spent two years at Vermont, and then I worked for three years as a Director of Student Activities at Mount St. Mary's College in Newburgh, New York. In the spring of '93 I decided to leave that institution. I applied to numerous positions, applied to a brand new position here that was focused on off-campus student concerns, as well as leadership development programs. Uh, and so I applied, and was the fortunate recipient, so I have been working here since 1993 as a professional. I have been blessed to have multiple changes in my career here at Plattsburgh. I-shortly after I got here, there was a strategic plan that the college unveiled that focused a lot on service, and, sort of civic engagement, and so we started developing a lot of service programs things like Project H.E.L.P., Alternative Break Programs, we used to have a community service scholarship program, we helped create, and later on hosted and AMERICORP Program on campus. So, that's where my energy got shifted, um, for a number of years with leadership things, but then in '99, I was asked to become the Director of Residence Life. So, I worked in Housing and Residence Life from '99

until [short pause,] 2013. Um, and then April 2013 I was asked to be the Vice-President of Student Affairs. Prior to April 2013 though, I also got some additional responsibilities outside of Housing and Residence Life, and probably starting in around... 2007, 2008 range is when I started supervising Allison Swick-Duttine, in terms of Fraternity and Sorority Life. So, uh, I've had-starting in that period, a little more in-depth knowledge, and involvement with the fraternity/sorority community. Um, so that's where we are. I don't currently supervise Allison, although I certainly continue to work closely with her and meet with her regularly.

**Interviewer:** Great. Um, thank you. So you said that in around 2007/2008, you started to have more interaction with the fraternity/sorority community. So, the purposes of this interview is to get your perceptions of how the hazing death of Walter Dean Jennings, um, affected our community-the SUNY Plattsburgh community, the student affairs community and so forth. Um, but prior to the incident in 2003, what were your perceptions of fraternity and sorority life?

**BH:** And I can go back to my student days, I had friends who were members of fraternities and sororities. Uh, used to date, you know, a sorority woman. Uh, never found it attractive for me, certainly it was, uh, a social outlet and even when I returned back, continued to believe it was largely a social outlet. Certainly, they had a significant presence on campus and certainly fully involved-engaged in service programs and things of that nature. So, you know, my interactions with fraternity/sorority members was through other leadership things, RAs-<sup>i</sup>you know one of my best friends, was heavily involved in a fraternity that is no longer here, but we were RA's together for two years. So, you know that was my window into it, uh, but also when I was a student is when I got my first direct interaction, uh, I was an SA Senator and back in the day we had an Off-Campus Concerns Board, that I chaired and we used to do some real specific events like focusing on sidewalks in the community, and I would organize fraternities, clubs and

organizations to help shovel sidewalks off campus, and so, uh, they contributed. As I... later got involved much later, I definitely have grown in appreciation for-I still do not think they're for everyone. I also have-while I appreciate them more I also grow in concern for the continued mentality and practices that still exist in fraternities and sororities, but I've also grown in appreciation and understanding, that some of those behaviors or traditions that continue in those organizations are also paralleled in our athletic teams, and other organizations. There are some other student organizations on this campus that have as deep or deeper sense of history and culture that perpetuates certain views, beliefs, and so forth on this campus as fraternities and sororities, and some of them are even academically based. Our theatre group, PSTV, *Cardinal Points*, those are all student groups that have extremely deep, uh, history on this campus, that gets perpetuated, um, in different means, but the average person doesn't think of that. Um, and there's no-the big difference is, there's no formal intake process for those groups. There's informal intake processes for those groups, but the stark difference is there is no formal. I don't know if that answers your question.

**Interviewer:** No, no. It does, thank you. [Clears throat.] So, the hazing death of Walter Dean Jennings occurred in 2003, can you talk a little bit about your-any perceptions that you had, about the unrecognized group-Psi Epsilon Chi, that Walter Dean Jennings was pledging?

**BH:** Yeah, Psi Ep, uh, from my view as a student- I never stepped into that house. Um, in all the years. As a student, or as faculty staff, I never stepped into 72 Broad Street. And um-I believe that's the address. It never attracted me, and it was always seen in my view and I think a pretty wide view of a group of men that were rogue at times, even when they were recognized, and that unfortunately perpetuated the typical Animal House stereotype. You know, we would have incidents there because they were so, so visible, and directly across from one of our residence

halls, you know, numerous times in history on opening weekend we'd wake up and there were signs hanging out the window with "Fathers, thank you for sending your daughters to Plattsburgh," and things of that nature. Uh, move-in days when men were hanging out drinking all-day long and so forth. So, that certainly-the mentality that they threw all caution to the wind, they had no concern... about image or they thought the image-maybe they did, but you know, the lens that I look through they had no concern for image as an organization, or a sense of responsibility, but maybe they were projecting the image that they actually wanted, and if so they were successful at it. Um, so that's the impression I had, that they- and, once they lost their recognition we knew-and I again, leading up to that point, I was a colleague of Allison's, tried to support so things, you know in residence halls, you know, we housed a fraternity on campus- actually your fraternity on campus for a while. So, I would work closer with her on and off with things-continued to work with individual students but not necessarily in the vein of, you know specific fraternity/sorority life, uh, but that group was always- it just didn't have a positive reputation.

**Interviewer:** Okay, great. Um, so can you speak a little bit about your knowledge of the incident itself?

**BH:** Yeah, um, that's where-I'm not going to-I'm probably not going to add a lot to this. Where I got involved, I certainly was called, you know by that time I was seen as one of the campuses', sort of responders to emergencies, the fact that he lived on campus and me being the Director of Residence Life, I was brought into the situation, but I never, I never um, interacted with, the fraternity members, or former fraternity members, I didn't interact with the parents, you know Bill [Laundry]<sup>ii</sup> largely did that, you know Steve [Matthews]<sup>iii</sup> was certainly heavily involved in the judicial process as things unfolded. I was behind the scenes, and providing whatever

guidance I could, you know, as well as leading the efforts of some of the aftermath in the residence halls, you know, with the staff, and where any reactions-support that we needed to provide for friends and so forth in his residence hall, and other places on campus. So, that was my involvement, you know I think I contributed some support, or organization to support the memorial situations, the vigils, and things of that nature, but I would not say I was involved in the minutia of the response, I played more of a supporting role. So, you know, as things evolved, and as we got information we certainly reacted to it, tried to, um- yeah I don't know, I don't know if I'm going off on a tangent that you don't want.

**Interviewer:** It's fine.

**BH:** Yeah, I'll be honest, I don't feel like I was heavily-I was there but I played a supporting role.

**Interviewer:** Ok, great. So, how did you initially find out?

**BH:** [Nods head.] I think I got a phone call, telling me there's a death, and I can't- I don't know if it was Bill who called me or University Police. It was probably University Police that called me, and I remember, you know, going to U.P. and we worked out of there for the most part. Um, for a while and as the initial impact, by then- well, we were still in the College Center, um... yeah, we were still in the college center, working out of what is now the Center for Student Involvement, back in that timeframe it was the Dean of Students Office, with Bill being the Dean of Students, um, we still hadn't dispersed all over the place by that time. By then he [Bill] was interim, or maybe not quite interim-well you would know, have you talked to Bill yet?

**Interviewer:** Uh, yeah. And Bill was interim at the time.

**BH:** So, he was splitting his time-but I think it was in 2003 he was asked to be interim, so he was splitting his time between [the] College Center and here [in Administration Building.] So he, honchoed [sic] a lion share of this, he knew the parents, because of them being alums and so, you know, I again played a coordinating role with the RD and the RAs, making sure counselors were available, making referrals. Um, yeah.

**Interviewer:** So, I know it's [clears throat,] it's difficult to hark back to, well eleven years now, but to the best of your memory how did you feel once you found out about this?

**BH:** Uh, for me it's sadness, you know, I don't... I don't-I'm not someone who gets overwhelmed by this stuff, I kick into, you know, response mode. You know, what do we need to do? Um, but sadness as the story continued some shock, I guess you could say, in terms of how it happened. I had never heard of such a thing, that you could die from water intoxication, you know, that was just so foreign a concept- what do you mean? Alcohol poisoning and so forth. So, everyone assumed, I sort of remember there was this sort of questioning as it all came into focus that how could that happen? So that was part of the response, because we didn't know that immediately, you know, that didn't surface for a while so, it was from what I recall somewhat of a mystery, [short pause] you know, why was he taken to the hospital initially? And then making bad assumptions, we assumed it was alcohol, and uh, then as it unfolded. But, other than that... how did I feel? What was my reaction... I think...yeah I don't know, usually my typical response to things like this is sadness for the family, who are alums, sadness for, uh, and the members involved. Even though, I'll be honest I didn't have a favorable view of the organization. I always hold out that this wasn't their intention; they didn't wake up that morning and decided to kill Dean. And so, so, you know sad for them as well the conditions that they created that led to this, they- I think are fully responsible for that. He had some responsibility too, not to do it. They

created the conditions where he made that choice, and or felt pressured to do it and it changed their lives overnight. And they're going to have to live with that for the rest of their lives, and that's profound. I've always found moments like that for anyone; involved in something like that it's just a profound moment. Yeah, I wonder, and I never knew any of them personally and they certainly have not kept in touch, but you wonder if they have reconciled that to this day.

**Interviewer:** Right. So, you gave a very vivid description of your personal experience so thank you. From your perspective, from where you were sitting in 2003, how do you feel the SUNY Plattsburgh community reacted to the incident?

**BH:** [Shakes head, sighs.] I'm conflicted. This is really interesting timing for me, that were doing this interview. I want to say-and I believe this, I believed this at the time and I still believe it today. One thing that this community is good at, I believe, in my experiences, overall the SUNY Plattsburgh community is a very caring community. And so, it rallied. It stepped up. It supported one another, and you know there was certainly an element, a justifiable element, you know, these people are evil, and there needs to be a swift response to something of this nature. But again in terms of behind the scenes and for me that's what, you know, I was attempting to ensure, that-I had no clue who he was friends with, I had no clue who sat next to him in classrooms, I have no clue who he may have dated or not dated. So, immediately you go to focus on people he lived with, but then also trying to keep in mind, are we providing the opportunity for comfort support for people anywhere on this campus that may have known him and may be impacted by this? Depending on how invested any given student is in this community, they may not have known Dean one bit, but may have still had a profound emotional response to something like this. Because depending on your life experiences this is shocking, you don't think about you know your college having an event like this. You may read about it, you may see it in

the news but why here? Why would it happen here? Um and why would it happen to us? So, I think we responded well overall, in the immediate aftereffect, and I think that's something we've always done well, and continue to do well. We respond well to crisis.

Longer term, it certainly sparked lot of debate, lots of conversation, lots of, um... teaching, professing whatever you want to call it for how do we prevent this from ever happening again? Some would point back now that that was-that this community needed this unfortunate event to get us to the point now where we appear to communicate pretty clearly that we don't tolerate hazing. And why I find that really interesting to be having this conversation now, in this moment in time<sup>iv</sup>, I keep-I have now heard from two different camps on this campus criticizing the college, and rightfully so, that we say we don't tolerate hazing, but the campus is doing a poor job of saying we don't tolerate sexual assault, we don't tolerate racism. You know, we just had an open forum on Tuesday about sexual violence on this campus. Last night Michael Haynes brought together 200 to 300 students in a very short time frame, because of racism on this campus. Um, and the comparison that's being made specifically is, you say you don't tolerate hazing... but what about this, and put any issue or topic on the table. We're not as good, from those people's perspective to say this community doesn't tolerate those other things, and so for me-and I'm going to be having further conversations with students, about how do we get there without having something like this. The students who are involved with this sexual assault movement would say, well you've already sacrificed women there, uh-and or men. We haven't-we do have sexual assaults on this campus, and we haven't gotten to the point where they believe we've taken a stand and we don't tolerate it. Um... the irony of all that is, if I understand it correctly-and I want to better understand this-when they draw the comparison and say the college says we don't tolerate hazing. I wonder, and I don't know the answer to this, do they think

hazing doesn't happen here? We profess that, through Allison's operation very well, and through IFC<sup>v</sup> ISA<sup>vi</sup>. But, do they really think we've eradicated hazing from this campus, because I know we haven't. But, if they think that, I find that fascinating to a degree. Um, so in the aftermath thanks to students thanks to Allison, and her connections nationally and so forth, they have been working incredibly hard on the topic of hazing and obviously it has made a difference, it's a topic that continues to get, um, attention, and you know that's something Allison has been really good at, is making sure-and her model is very different from other models on our campus- she's providing the opportunity, she's certainly keeping the tradition alive, but it's largely students who are programming those things around anti-hazing or Hazing Prevention Week. Allison's using her influence to help student reps get on the national board for Hazingprevention.org, so there is activity there, uh on that particular topic. I would argue were putting-maybe not the exact same effort, but sometimes even more effort into these topics, but from a P.R. perspective we're obviously not having the success that the hazing prevention has had. So, there's a lot of irony to me. I don't know if that's relevant to your story. Does that answer enough of how we responded to this?

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah, of course. And it's an interesting comparison that is being drawn now.

**BH:** I don't know if anyone else-well yeah, the students are bringing that to my attention for me to- you know I don't think they understand the history, I'm going to be curious but I'm going to ask-because I want to know-do they even know about Dean Jennings death? Some of them may, but I don't know if they all do. So, do they even know how we got here? Um, but unfortunately tragedy does draw attention, and creates change. The criticism, and I would agree with it to an extent-I'm just now in a position now where it just so happens to land on my shoulders-we do have students who are sexually assaulted. How do we prevent that? Are we outraged enough as a

community? Clearly some students and faculty don't think we're outraged enough to prevent it. Um, it's a really challenging and muddy situation of: how do you get there? How do you get there? I'll go back to what I already said: I don't think we've eradicated hazing from this campus and that's a really naïve view if anyone has that, but that's just my personal opinion.

**Interviewer:** So, you talked about [clears throat] how we-and I'm paraphrasing- but how we made strides in the hazing prevention effort. My next question was going to be what official policies or procedures, or unofficial precedents from your perspective were put into place-you, mentioned a few already- but, um, I don't know if you can expound upon what, what things were put in place to keep this from happening in the future. Because it does seem-and in my last interview with Allison-it does seem that we have made substantial gains, um in this area.

**BH:** And it was slow. And it was for some people's patience it was way too slow. But I think, um, I think- and I am drawing parallels here-people continue to be critical, and I think Allison's fully aware of this, but critical of Allison's approach to these topics and how she works with fraternities and sororities um, even members of fraternities and sororities don't like-up front don't like Allison's approach to things and when that's brought to my attention, I say You have a right to have those feelings and thoughts, but before I respond do you understand her approach. Do you understand there is a rationale to this? And what you can't understand, because you haven't been here long enough to see the change- is that this approach-and it's one of many approaches, it's not the end all be all-but this approach has created significant change over a long period of time. And that's where the average student is here too short of a time to see visible-or significant visible change. Students do create change all the time, they see their successes and so forth, but if you're talking about systematic things, if you're talking about culture change you've got to step back and observe it over a longer period of time. Culture, typically, does not change

quickly; it's just the nature of it. And, so, so that for me is um, how change has been created, where Allison has engaged you, [points to interviewer] the student creating conditions by bringing in outside people to have these different institutes and workshops and so forth year after year engaging students in the conversation. Until you, the students, started self-regulating, started having your own conversations started holding each other accountable, understanding that your decisions can influence others, you know, what one group does can influence what another group does. Prior to this, you know, some sororities would still have social events with Psi Ep, after that it was a wake up, and now the average sorority would not have a social event with an unrecognized group. The average fraternity would not have a social event with an unrecognized sorority, if we had that. Because the whole system has evolved, has matured to understand the difficulty of that and why it just continues to perpetuate certain things. The system as a whole is more image conscious and I would say the average member-you certainly don't have all of your members of fraternities and sororities caring about the image of the community as a whole, they just don't, but I do think there's been a huge movement to- and improvement on more average members of fraternities and sororities thinking beyond themselves, thinking beyond their chapters and that's the self-regulation we need. Um, and that's all positive, that creates safer opportunities for our students. [Short pause.] It's not perfect. But again that historical perspective says the community- and I'll be honest, it would be really easy to want to get rid of all fraternities and sororities. It'd be really easy to go there. There's so much stacked up against this community, of do you really bring value? [Short pause.] There's too many examples to say it doesn't. It's not worth it in the end. But, um, but, you know, in that regard, in working closer with Allison and being exposed to more and sitting in on the conversations and so forth, I would put myself in the category of, you know, sort of, you know, a convert to a degree. I still wouldn't

profess to be one hundred percent ally or advocate for the fraternity and sorority community. But, I think it's doing some wonderful things for a lot of our students, and so that's why I do support it, or attempt to support it overall.

**Interviewer:** Great. Um, [clears throat] we talked a lot about-or you talked a lot about- how it affected the community and how we made strides toward making this not happen again, which is great. But, uh, one of the final questions I'll ask-one of the wrap up questions- is how do you feel you were affected by this incident. Whether that was through the incident itself, or through the response, um, or any iteration of anything that popped up really.

**BH:** [Long pause.] You know, on a personal level, to be honest I don't know if it affected me greatly. It's-this may sound cold or crass but- death in general is not something that phases me much, you know, I truly accept it for what it is. We will all have our time when we are no longer here, and uh, again I used the word earlier, sad. Whenever a young person that hasn't reached their potential in life-it's sad. It's not that I don't feel emotions about that because I do, but it's just plain sad. But it, but, I don't, um, we can't control these things. I can't predict, or control when I will no longer be here, and I don't get hung up over it, I don't spend any time on dwelling on what if. Um, professionally it's one of those things for me, uh, that I take-I try to learn from- ultimately for me my responsibility and the collective responsibility is to support students as best we can.

And so, there's always going to be adversity that comes up. Some things fall under the umbrella of crisis, other adversity doesn't. Um, this one clearly-for Dean his family, friends, the community at-large certainly rises to a crisis, and so how it's changed me is just how do we better take care of this community? How do we better serve the community in the, um, in the

immediate and in the after fact? Um, and not let it, a significant event like that pass us by without creating, to the extent that we can, creating change to try to prevent a similar situation. I mean, and that's, given our educational mission, shame on us if we did nothing after the fact. Um... and, uh, and that's again where I'm drawing a bunch of parallels here: shame on the institution if we don't capitalize on what's happened with this most recent incident with racism<sup>vii</sup> and the event that happened last night, and shame on us as a college community, and I'll include myself, you know, shame on me for not figuring this out, uh, better on how to prevent sexual assaults.

We get complacent. It's too damn easy to say, no other campus has figured it out yet either. So, were okay. Um, but we need to stop being complacent, somehow we need to figure it out. It's not easy, there's only so many hours in the day, there's only so many resources we'll never satisfy everyone. But again, if I keep saying that and convince myself well at least we're trying something, then it's okay. It allows me to sleep at night. We're not really-well we're not-maybe I'm too close here, we're not creating change fast enough. The reality is: with all the national attention with these things, having an African-American president has certainly changed the discourse on race. Having the White House, again with this current president, just create a task force on sexual assault on college campuses is changing the discourse, you know, so, it's just not happening fast enough. And in the moment, with this, we weren't able to-with the death of Dean-we were criticized by many at that point. We didn't create the change fast enough. There were still fraternities and sororities that were engaging in incredibly risky behavior in the aftermath of this. Now we have the luxury to sit here and say, wow, 2003, 2014. Look at where we've come. Let's just be patient on these other topics. But, that's hard to tell the victim today on again, if it's hazing, or if it's sexual assault, or if it's racism. It's hard to tell that victim, give it time it'll get better. Because we clearly have. We get to say now, we've been successful to a

degree. Again we can't-if anyone on this campus thinks we've eradicated hazing they're fooling themselves. But, we haven't had any public incidents. So, it would be easy for the average person to think that we have eradicated it. But, uh, that's the challenge. The whole timing thing is a major challenge. So, I'm rambling.

**Interviewer:** No, it's... it's all very helpful and all very insightful. And I really appreciate it because, you know, obviously with this project we're trying to um, were trying to get many different perspectives on how it affected individuals who were directly involved in it but also how it affected the community. So, um, I really appreciate your responses. So, is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to discuss, any statements, comments, questions for me?

**BH:** [Short pause.] Well I think the other thing I wrestle with is-I should probably ask him- and I don't know if you share other interviews with others, but one of the things that I think did change and influence Bill very specifically, is that he really struggled in the aftermath in taking away recognition from any other fraternities and sororities. It's not that it didn't happen in his tenure since 2003, because it did with Theta Kappa Beta<sup>viii</sup>. But, it's this notion and it's a real balance of trying to weigh out, that's a severe move and that's what some victims in certain pockets want the college to take severe action, like taking away recognition. But, that's balanced with: if you truly have a troubled organization engaging in really risky behavior and putting our student's safety at risk, and we know that, if we take away recognition we have no influence whatsoever.

So, we've long been, since 2003, accused of not severing ties with certain groups quicker, you know, we gave them too many chances. But what's not considered on the other side, and I still haven't figured out what's the magic balance here, but what's not appreciated, and not thought through, if we take recognition away from the group, those students still exist here. If

they live together off-campus they'll live together off-campus. We have no influence on them at all. Um, again the parallel here, some would say under Bill's leadership, we strung along some troubled fraternities and or sororities way too long. [Short pause.] So, that's difficult, and I appreciate the more I sit in this chair, I understand and he was really knee-deep in this. He didn't want another student death because we had no influence. That's what drove him, and he shared that with me, that's what drove him in some of his decisions about other troubled groups. But, I also know, or I also believe, and I think as a campus were fortunate-blessed- in many regards, the fact is our students are doing some incredibly risky things, risky choices, putting certain substances in their body, every single day, every single weekend, we could end up with a student death any time. We just did have a student death from a heroin overdose, second one this academic year.

So, were not immune neither of them became very public, neither of those students were recognizable by the masses. So, neither of those deaths this academic year sent shockwaves through the community. But, for my book, equally as sad, and even Dr. Ettlting raised the question and I'm actually meeting with-not about this but I'm going to bring it up, I've already brought it up with Dr. Comelo-we have a brand new AOD coordinator, Dr. Ettlting asked, well, why aren't we doing more? Why aren't we outraged we've had our second death to a heroin overdose this year? You've seen nothing [points to interviewer,] in campus media about it, unless it's in today's *Cardinal Points*. Did you even know that we had had two student deaths?

**Interviewer:** I had heard about the most recent one but...

**BH:** Well, why aren't we outraged as a community about that? What are we doing to prevent that? And to be honest, were really not doing anything and that doesn't feel good. But, I'm no less or no more sad for Stockton Pike, who just died from the heroin overdose, than I was for Walter Dean Jennings to me they're on par. Both senseless deaths. But, one certainly draws a heck of a lot more attention than the other. And back to my earlier comment, I'm somewhat stoic about death in general, but it's clearly, what a waste of a young life, all these people have great potential; and we'll never know what impact they would have had on you, Plattsburgh, the world. What are we missing out on? That's the sad part.

**Interviewer:** Well.

**BH:** [Laughs.]

**Interviewer:** If that's all.

**BH:** That's all I got.

**Interviewer:** Well, um, thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Hartman often changes topics midsentence throughout interview.

<sup>ii</sup> Former Dean of Students and Vice-President of Student Affairs in 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> Former assistant to the Dean of Students, current Dean of Students transitioning into Director of Housing and Residence Life.

<sup>iv</sup> At time of interview there had been several instances where students became disgruntled with campus administration for not taking, in the student's minds, appropriate judicial action for instances of racism and sexual assault.

<sup>v</sup> Interfraternity Council- A governance council for all campus fraternities.

<sup>vi</sup> Intersorority Association- A governance council for all campus sororities.

<sup>vii</sup> At time of interview a member of a fraternity had made racist remarks to another student, causing students to mobilize an anti-racism campaign.

<sup>viii</sup> A fraternity that lost campus recognition in the spring of 2010.