BULLIVANT
HOUSER

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY: MAKING A DIFFERENCE[i]
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You are kind, smart and important. You can make a difference.

Good morning and thank you for having me.

You are here to celebrate being Greek. I am honored to be here to celebrate the recognition and honors you are sharing and to talk with you about ethical responsibility. No one here today is not a member of the Greek community so my first question to you is why are you celebrating your achievements only amongst yourselves, essentially in a vacuum? There are so many great accomplishments of Greek women today, and historically, and far too often you allow the negativity associated with being Greek to control the "brand" for Greek women. You need to share your accomplishments beyond this narrow community.

I will be speaking about generalities today. Please don't take offense. I recognize that there are exceptions to generalities, but I use generalities to help make my points.

I am pleased to be here. But I am frequently annoyed when I express my involvement with the Greek world to others who are not Greek or who do not understand the breadth and depth of what each one of you does for your campus, your communities and your businesses. For example, I told someone I was working late last night to finalize this presentation and she said to me, "Why? You're only speaking to sorority girls." Next, when I was General Counsel for Kappa Delta, when I told other lawyers what I did, many would quickly respond with, "That must be fun." And although serving as General Counsel was fun, it was much more

difficult and complex than others unfamiliar with the Greek world would expect. Unless you are Greek, it is so difficult to understand what you as members of a vast international Greek community do and deal with daily. People believe and say foolish things about being Greek.

Yet, the brand that the Greek community has created is one of negativity, so can I understand the foolishness. Greeks are not viewed positively. Deaths, alcohol poisoning, sexual assault, drug use, illegal prescription drug use, hazing, bullying, lack of character, lack of standards, selfishness, partying, living only for the 4 years, etc. are things the come to mind when many think of fraternity and sorority men and women Your actions, your decisions (or lack thereof), your willingness to forego your values and the values of your organizations for the sake of popularity, and your lack of commitment to the lifelong values that your groups espouse during your rituals have led to your "brand." Yet, when you are called upon to defend yourselves, you rely on your mottos, your purposes, your philanthropies, and your values to defend yourselves.

There is no doubt that your mottos and purposes and philanthropies and values are important. But you focus on these things when deciding what type of social to have, who to recruit, and what fraternity party to attend? During recruitment, for example, when you're selecting new members, do you say, "Let me tell you about our founders and the values they had when they founded our sorority over 100 years ago?" Do you tell potential new members "We're devoted to enriching the lives of members through lifetime opportunities for friendship, leadership, learning and service?" Do you think about

your motto, purpose or creed when coming up with party themes?

By in large, that doesn't happen. It doesn't happen because individual sorority chapters are focused on themselves. They want the best members; they want to be popular; they want to be considered the best sorority on campus; and, they are not worried about the costs of this focus on other sororities or on the community as a whole.

The Greek community is slowing working its way toward extinction. This is happening because individual chapters think far too individually about being popular and having fun then they do about their social or ethical responsibility to the whole (the Greek community) and the sustainability of the Greek system.

I'm here to talk about ethical responsibility. Ethical responsibility means recognizing when your organization's actions might be having an adverse effect on people – on your community -- and then taking steps to reduce that harm. For collegiate sorority members and individual chapters, it's harm to your chapter, the Greek system as a whole and to Oregon State University. For alumnae, it's your place of employment. It's about what the right thing is to do as an organization for the greater good.

Ethical responsibility can be understood by considering levels of responsibility generally. The most basic is the classical view of responsibility – having a responsibility to maximize profits for your personal sorority or business. For example, for businesses, this means focusing on following the laws and making as much money as possible for the owners. For sororities it means focusing on getting as many of the best members as possible and keeping going year after year and being socially popular on campus.

Another way to look at responsibility is through a socio-economic lens – recognizing you are a part of a larger community to which you have an obligation to give back. For example, for businesses, this might mean recognizing the need to donate to outside causes or imposing higher than necessary environmental controls. For sororities, this might mean each sorority works with one another to make decisions that help maintain not only the chapter but the entire Greek system on campus. It means thinking about using those mottos and values assigned to you by your founders and sororities to work with and for the greater whole of the community. Ethical responsibility aligns with the socio-economic view of responsibility.

Why should you care about ethical responsibility? For businesses, the public has come to expect that companies and their owners will give back, which leads to better PR for the company; it enhances a company's image; and, it likely leads to more sales and profits. For sororities, the public expects college students to be more responsible; to take care of each other; and, to make wiser decisions. If sororities do that, they can potentially change its brand from negative to positive, which will increase the number of women who go through recruitment each year and contribute to the sustainability of the Greek system as a whole. In addition, for both businesses and sororities, acting and making decisions that are ethically responsible will lead to a reduction in government/administrative oversight, which often leads to higher business costs or potential closures.

When there is a pro, there is a con and there are cons here. The pressure to make ethically responsible decisions leads to a feeling of lack of control. Companies and sororities feel as though this pressure is controlling their decisions and destiny. Next, leaders may feel they don't have the skill set or expertise to make the necessary ethically responsible decisions (legal or accounting, for example). Finally, acting ethically responsible doesn't mean others will follow suit. This is an especially true concern for sororities, who do not trust that other groups are acting in the same manner. Sororities are worried that if they act inconsistent with the other groups (placing higher restrictions on social activities or recruitment, for example), their image or reputation will be tarnished.

Moral behavior can be juxtaposed with ethical responsibility. There are three categories of morals: Basic (where you stick to the rules to avoid punishment or follow the rules to protect your self-interest); conventional (where you live up to the minimum expectations of people close to you or maintain conventional order by fulfilling obligations (such as contracts); and, principled (where you value the rights of others and uphold those absolute). I believe that ethical responsibility requires both conventional and principled morals. Decisions that sororities and businesses make don't have to always be made for the greater good but there are situations in which the rights of others should impact their decisions.

The thought of ethical responsibility and morals reminds me of the book, "The Help," the 2000 novel by Kathryn Stockett. The story is set in Mississippi in the early 1960s. During that time, young women were encouraged to go to college for the purpose of getting married and blacks and whites didn't mix. Yet, the

southern black maids devoted their working lives to caring for the children of the whiter upper and middle classes.

Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan is an exception to "go to college to meet a husband" stereotype. After graduation from Ole' Miss, she returns home to become a writer and hopes to make a difference. Despite the difficulty she encounters (the expectations of her friends, family, and community and various career obstacles), Skeeter presses on because she believes that she is working for the greater good. I believe that she believes that she had an ethical responsibility to make a difference in her community. Skeeter tries to change a community and others' way of thinking.

In my professional career, I have represented individuals who were hazing, bullied, harassed and sexually assaulted. They spoke up and were willing to go public (despite the pain of doing so) because they wanted to impact a community. Their ethics, their morals, and their shared responsibility to a greater good guided them in their convictions and decisions. They believed that one person and one voice could make a difference.

Imagine what impact you could have if you used your hundreds of voices. Imagine what a difference you together could make.

I'm not here to tell you to do anything or to preach about how to be better. If you want to talk ethical responsibility for your community – locally and internationally – you must decide what decisions to make. You must decide what sacrifices to make.

I am here to encourage you to ask the tough questions amongst yourselves about how to make a better community for all of you. What is a responsible decision? What is an ethical decision? What is the responsible and ethical decision that will help your greater community?

You are operating with a burden. How you can reduce the harm that not only present-day actions have caused to your community, but historic traditions and activities and viewpoints have caused to the Greek system? I recognize that challenge. This is the same for businesses who are trying to correct hundreds of years of poor environmental decisions, for example. But difficulty shouldn't be an impediment. One decision can change so much.

Do you think the founders of your organizations believed that their actions would create such vast organizations? I'm sure they couldn't even fathom what you have become today – the vastness of what the Greek system has become and the millions of dollars raised and donated to philanthropic causes. But they believed in their values and doing something for others. Do you?

Are you willing to make decisions to place community preservation over self-preservation? Are you willing to obtain the education and support from others to do so?

In "The Help," Skeeter's maid says to her, "Am I going to believe all them bad things them fools say about me today?"

"You is kind, you is smart, and you is important." (Aibileen Clark, "The Help.")

Are you as Greeks going to accept what the fools say about you?

Thank you.