FAMU death - Brutal rituals defied ban, band members say
It's 7 p.m. on Aug. 22, 2011. A thunderstorm is passing through Tallahassee as 350 members of the Florida A&M University Marching 100 assemble for the first time inside the school's cavernous band-rehearsal hall.

The students are seated in a semicircle of padded orange chairs on the green-carpeted floor — all dressed as if attending church. Behind them high on a wall, looking over their shoulders, is the portrait of the legendary William P. Foster, clad in white, who founded and made famous the Marching 100.
It's the first time freshmen and upperclassmen have been together as a band, seated by section, arranged by instruments: clarinets, piccolos, French horns, saxophones, trumpets, trombones, tubas, drums.

The freshmen are coming off one week of drills to teach them the basics of marching band: steps, movements, routines, music. It's their first taste of what the semester will bring: long, exacting practices on the open field they call "the patch" and the initiation ritual of hazing. They've already been scolded and taunted by the upperclass band members, warned never to walk on the patch. Freshmen don't deserve to walk. They have to run across the grass.

Before them are longtime band director Julian E. White; his nine-member staff; and an array of high-profile officials, students and alumni: FAMU President James Ammons, the director of the university police department, the president of the student government and the head of the band-alumni association. Off to one side are the six drum majors, all dressed alike and arranged by height.

The drum majors represent the pinnacle of achievement in the Marching 100: the student field generals of one of the nation's most celebrated marching bands. Among that group, Robert Champion — poised to become the head drum major the following year — is hard to miss.

He's a big guy, 26 years old, a little more than 6 feet tall and 235 pounds. He is remarkable in a number of ways. He's gay and doesn't hide it. He appeared as a teenager in the 2002 movie "Drumline," loosely based on the FAMU band. More importantly, he has managed to move up the ranks, for the most part, without subjecting himself to the semester-long hazing that faces the freshmen seated before him.

Hazing is the reason they are all assembled. Since 1998, the university has held hazing workshops to drill into the heads of the band students that hazing is unacceptable, hazing is against school regulations, hazing is against the law.

The university has good reason to beat the drum. Ivery Luckey, a clarinetist, was hospitalized for two weeks after being paddled more than 300 times in 1998. Trumpeter Marcus Parker went into renal failure following a 2001 hazing. Luckey won a $50,000 settlement. Parker was awarded $1.8 million in his lawsuit against the band members who beat him.

Speaker after speaker — Ammons, White, campus-police Chief Calvin Ross — repeat the same mantra: Participating in hazing, either as a victim or a hazer, can cost you your music

scholarship. You can be expelled from school. You can be arrested and charged with a third-degree felony.

In the workshop, band members hear that hazing extends beyond physical abuse. It includes doing chores and running errands for upperclassmen; extorting money from freshmen; and demeaning and abusive language.

Marcus Fabre', seated in the saxophone section, knows from experience the gap between what the adults say and what happens inside the band. He's a 20-year-old sophomore who spent his freshman year refusing to be hazed and paying the price with ostracism. The upperclassmen used him as an example: If you don't submit, you'll end up alone, just like Marcus.

There are others inside the rehearsal hall for whom the anti-hazing warnings are hollow admonishments and empty threats. Some of them belong to small groups within the sections: clarinetists who call themselves the "Clones," trumpet players who go by "Thunder," and a group of students from Georgia called the "Red Dawg Order."

They know hazing is banned but are determined to perpetuate it. Within six months, 26 of them will be suspended from performing at the Florida Classic football game in Orlando for hazing. Seven will be arrested.

In the final act of the hazing workshop, all band members sign a "hazing and harassment agreement" that acknowledges participating "as a hazer or hazee will immediately terminate my membership in the band."

As one band member signs the pledge, he thinks: They're going to do it anyway.

In another row, a freshman signs the document with little thought to the promise he's making. "Nobody took it seriously," he said.

That would become obvious within three short months as the band marched blindly toward tragedy.

Life in the band

In early September, days after the hazing workshop, five "pledges" line up according to height before members of the Clones, the clarinet subgroup. Inside the off-campus home of two Clones, the pledges begin their initiation into the group. They are exercised past the point of exhaustion and made to perform music to the strict satisfaction of upperclassmen. They are punched, slapped, paddled and belittled with profane insults. At least one leaves the hazing with bruises on her buttocks.

One pledge, Shantivia Conley, has had enough. When she doesn't return for the second hazing, the others are "prepped" — slapped hard on the back with two hands — for allowing Conley to quit. One is ordered to prep Conley for not showing up for further hazing.

In subsequent hazings, the four remaining pledges are extorted for money by the Clones, beaten, demeaned and pushed to exhaustion. It's the pain and indignity some FAMU students are willing to endure to win acceptance into the most famous college marching band in the country.

The legend of the Marching 100 draws students from throughout Florida and across the nation to the historically black university in Tallahassee: kids from Orlando, Miami, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, but also Atlanta, Detroit and Chicago.

This is the band that starred in television commercials, marched in presidential inaugurations, performed at Super Bowl halftimes, played with Kanye West at the Grammy Awards and was featured on "60 Minutes."

Everywhere band members go, from campus to the courthouse to the DoubleTree Hotel in downtown Tallahassee, they see pictures of the famous FAMU bands of the past. For some, this is the realization of the dream they had in high school. For others, a band scholarship to FAMU is their only way to attend college. About half the band is on scholarship or receiving financial aid.

Many are music majors, but some are not. They plan to pursue careers in business, pharmacy, law and education, but for now they are willing to sacrifice for the glory of belonging to the "Incomparable Marching 100, World's Best."

They are young men and women, many away from home for the first time, with the need for acceptance and belonging. The most vulnerable are willing to do just about anything — endure pain, risk their scholarships — to make it inside the secret and select subgroups of the Clones, Thunder, Gestapo, Red Dawgs, Screaming Demons, B Tone Express, Whales and The Z.

But this is not the kind of hazing students endured in some high-school bands — silly stuff such as forcing a boy to wear a bra on the outside of his shirt or making a girl wear a "kick me" sign to class.

As in the military, the youngest recruits endure taunts on the practice field meant to break their spirit or force them to work harder. Go kill yourself, freshman. Why are you here? Women are insulted with sexist slurs. Male freshmen are made to feel emasculated, ignored as if they don't exist, when they try to talk to upperclassmen.

Freshmen are forced to remain together at all times. Eat together. Arrive for practice together. Walk your freshman sister to class. When they travel to football games and other events, they're bullied and made to turn over the money they receive to pay for their meals.

In text messages and phone calls, upperclassmen order them to provide everything from candy and sports drinks to liquor and a barbecue grill.

Sometimes, when a student doesn't know his music or plays a wrong note, he's hit with the bell of a horn or punched in the arm.

The long hours of practice in the hot Florida sun — from 3:30 p.m. to as late as 7 p.m. Monday through Friday — make it tough. The hard work, paired with the constant degradation, makes some feel like quitting virtually every day.

"Everything made you want to quit," said a freshman who stuck it out.

Hazing predators and their willful victims were there when Bernie Hendricks was in the band from 1991-97. They were probably there, too, when his father was in the band from 1958 to 1963. Hendricks' father was director of student activities from 1986 until his death in 1992, and one of his duties was to suspend and expel band members caught hazing.

When Bernie joined the band as a drummer, his father warned him against hazing: "If you do something, I'll have to kick you out of school, just like I've had to kick other kids out of school."

But the line is sometimes blurry between what constitutes hazing and what is part of the militarylike drills, discipline and precision that go into becoming the best marching band. A section leader may yell at a trombone player for missing a note, or an upperclassman may belittle a freshman for failing to master a complicated drill step. Are those acts of hazing or expressions of what it takes to make it in the Marching 100?

"It's not for everybody," said Hendricks, 38, the band director at Ocoee High School. "It's a big commitment, and some can't handle it so they quit and use that [hazing] as an excuse."

That gradation of what constitutes hazing leaves it up to every band member to decide what he or she is willing to do, and where to draw the line.

Jason Lawrence, who played clarinet from 2007-09 along with Robert Champion, never considered verbal harassment an act of hazing, but he drew the line at physical contact. Nobody was going to put their hands on him — and nobody did.

"People only go through what they allow someone to do to them," said Lawrence, 22, who graduated in 2011.

The roughest, most physical hazing takes place off campus — often late at night. Students have to find a ride to get there and then find their way home afterward.

Timothy Barber, a former head drum major who graduated in 2002, drew his line at the end of practice. He didn't hang with upperclassmen. He didn't go to their dorms or apartments after hours. He didn't meet them on the practice field after midnight.

But he, too, heard the competing voices. They came from alumni who reminded everyone in the band how easy students had it now. Today's band was not as good, not as accomplished, not as tough as those illustrious bands of the past.

And Barber, 37, heard the voices of upperclassmen saying hazing is the tradition of the band, it's what builds camaraderie, it's the fire in the forge that makes us stronger.

"Who are you going to listen to? You have students coming into the FAMU band and these underground sources saying you have to do it because these people did it," said Barber. "You don't have enough people saying, 'It didn't happen to me, so you shouldn't let it happen to you,' or 'It happened to me, and it was wrong.' "

Not enough voices, speaking loudly enough from within the band itself, saying hazing isn't what makes the band great. It's the marching and the music, nothing else.

Humiliation and assaults are not humbling — they are harmful.

"They call it 'humblizing,' " said Marcus Fabre'. "But humble doesn't mean getting hit and not doing anything about it. It means you are willing to learn, and you don't know everything. Paddling doesn't help you do anything better."

Warning signs

On Oct. 31, inside an off-campus apartment, 18-year-old Bria Hunter is being berated for trying to skip a meeting of the Red Dawg Order. Hunter, a freshman clarinetist, is from the same Atlanta-area high school as Robert Champion. Champion tells Hunter she doesn't need to subject herself to hazing. She ignores him, but after enduring physical abuse during Red Dawg meetings, Hunter has second thoughts.

Inside that apartment with about 11 other pledges, she is punished for telling a lie to skip the initiation meeting. For lying, she is forced to march in place while two of the other Red Dawg members beat her on the legs with their fists.

Hunter is 5-feet-1 and weighs 112 pounds. The two Red Dawgs beating on her legs are 6-feet-3, about 175 pounds, and 5-feet-8, 150 pounds. One is 19, the other 23.

The next day, the Red Dawgs repeat the treatment, this time using a metal ruler across the top of Hunter's thighs. The beatings cause blood clots in her legs, deep bone bruises and a broken femur. On Nov. 7, unable to stand the pain, Bria Hunter is taken to the hospital by ambulance.

Within a few days, Band Director Julian White suspends 26 band members from participating in the Florida Classic for hazing.

As word of Hunter's injuries and the suspensions spread through the band, Fabre' remembers his attempts to convince freshmen members that they didn't need to be hazed.

You can be in the band without submitting to the abuse, he told them.

Yeah, but look at what happened to you, they responded: You're shunned, you're all alone.

But if you all stand up to hazing, you won't be alone. You'll all be together, he replied.

"I tried to get the other freshmen to stand up," Fabre' said. "Nobody wanted to be in my shoes."

The injury to Hunter and the suspensions should have been the warning shot that things have gone too far, the tradition is off the tracks. This is Ivery Luckey and Marcus Parker all over again.

Instead of backing off, the FAMU hazers stand defiant and undeterred.

They would prove true the prophecy by the mother of Fabre'. Earlier in the semester, she met with Julian White about the harassment of her son for refusing to be hazed.

"If you don't do more to stop this, somebody is going to get killed," Felicia Fabre' said.

Aboard Bus C

On the afternoon of Nov. 19, Orlando's Florida Citrus Bowl fills with 60,000 spectators for the 66th meeting of the Florida A&M University Rattlers and the Bethune-Cookman University Wildcats.

They are here — dividing the stadium into opposite sides of green and orange, gold and maroon — ostensibly to watch a football game, but really to watch the halftime battle of the bands. The Classic — a "show interrupted by a football game" — is where everybody goes to the bathroom before halftime, not during.

By the time the FAMU band takes the field, led by Robert Champion and the five other drum majors, the sky is turning dark as storm clouds move over the stadium.

For the freshmen in the Marching 100, making it to the Florida Classic is all that matters. It's the last performance of the football season, and band members are treated like celebrities.

Their nine buses are escorted by Orlando Police Department motorcycles from the Rosen Plaza hotel to the Citrus Bowl. Bus A, the lead bus where the band staff and section leaders ride, is the most luxurious ride — complete with a sunroof, wood floors and electrical outlets at every seat. Julian White and the drum majors ride to the game in a black limousine.

After the Classic, win or lose, the band rejoices. A collective relief comes with the end of months of practice, the striving for perfection, the precision necessary to master the 360-steps-per-minute re-enactment of a rattlesnake's strike.

Upperclassmen are hugging and congratulating freshmen. They're exchanging gifts and personal items, including band hats and jackets. Hazers and hazees, tormentors and victims, are now good friends.

One freshman was prepared to confront the upperclassmen who had bullied him, but after the Classic, he was greeted "like when a soldier comes back and the family rushes at you."

"My goal was to not change ... , but you can't help it," he said. "After I thought about it, I was kind of like, 'I was being over-dramatic a lot of the times. It really wasn't that bad.' "

In that one moment, the torment is forgotten and forgiven. And sometimes, in that instant, a hazee begins the transition into a hazer, perpetuating the tradition upon the next class of freshmen.

"Abused children become abusers," Felicia Fabre' said. "That is what happens with the band: Abused band members become abusers."

For many of the freshmen in the Marching 100, the Florida Classic is the end of the abuse. But not for those who ride back to the Rosen Plaza hotel aboard Bus C.

Marcus Fabre' knows all about Bus C. In his freshman year, when he was being ostracized for refusing to be hazed, he found his name listed on Bus C after the Classic. He knew he didn't belong on that bus, which carries mostly members of the percussion section. He knew he was being set up.

"They tried to get me on that bus last year," Fabre' said. "I just didn't ride it."

The percussion subgroup, called The Z, has its own initiation ritual that takes place throughout the semester. It's called "Crossing Bus C." And it would cost Robert Champion his life.

After the game, later that night, the charter buses are escorted back to the hotel. Bus C parks in the back of the hotel, the engine running. About 30 FAMU band members are aboard the bus.

A number of students subject themselves to hazing. Some will walk from the front to the back of the bus while being attacked. Sometimes, the hazing victim sits in the "hot seat" at the back of the bus while being slapped and beaten.

Nobody knows why Robert Champion boarded Bus C. The bus he rode from Tallahassee to Orlando was Bus H. Some students speculate that, after years of resisting hazing and warning others not to participate, Champion decided to submit to earn the respect and loyalty of the band before he became head drum major the following year. The Classic would be his last chance at acceptance. Others suggest he might have been lured inside the bus and beaten as his punishment for his stance against hazing.

Tall, heavy-set, with a shaved head and a short-cropped beard and mustache, Robert Champion moves down the narrow aisle between the rows of seats through a gauntlet of fists.

He is struck in the stomach, arms, chest and back. One purplish-gray bruise extends from the top of his back almost to his waist. Beneath those bruises and abrasions, his body is bleeding.

Immediately after the beating, Champion complains of thirst and exhaustion. His vision blurs, he vomits and collapses inside the bus.

Holding Champion as he is dying, an unidentified person calls 911 at 9:46 p.m.

"He is in my hands, ma'am. He's cold. He's in my hands," the male voice says. "His eyes are open, but he's not responding."

About an hour later, Robert Champion dies in Dr. P. Phillips Hospital. Early the next day, Julian White identifies the body.

The cause of death is listed as hemorrhagic shock caused by blunt-force trauma: killed by hazing.

Here is what else died that day: the shiny-brass reputation of a precision college marching band.

The famous FAMU band is suffering from a self-inflicted wound by a cadre of band members who believed they were untouchable, beyond reproach and superior in their conceit that nothing bad would happen.

Until it did.

http://www.sun-sentinel.com/os-famu-hazing-narrative-20120204,0,2244462,full.story