

Gamma Phi Era History for 1998-2002

Fall 1998

“Brothers, please welcome the newest pledge of the Gamma Phi Chapter of Beta Theta Pi!” This call heralded the news that a freshman had just accepted a bid during fall rush. Often, the call was given from the first landing of the main stairs to the crowd of brothers and rushees filling the dining room and formal living room. At that time, “formal rush” merely meant the first week of the school semester when rushees flooded out of the dorms every night to walk from house to house to greet members, eat free food, and hopefully work on receiving a bid to the house of their choice. “Summer rush” was also the norm at this time. Those freshman going to the University of Oklahoma in the fall and planning to rush would register with IFC, and each fraternity was given the list of candidates to begin their rush efforts. Of course, most of rush contacts were made through legacies, high school classmates, and referrals from alumni.

Summer rush was basically a mixture of in-home visits with the most coveted rushees, social barbecues to which a broader scope of rushees was invited, and throwing large parties both in Norman and Tulsa to which everyone was invited. The rush team consisted of one rush chair, and three rush team members. The rush team was put up in a four bedroom apartment each summer for the entire summer, and the rush team members were not allowed to work. Brother Zach Allen was the rush advisor at the time, and he did an excellent job of trying to corral the rush team, get them moving in the same direction, and not to blow too much rush money on parties.

I personally did not go through summer rush, as I decided to matriculate to Norman in the middle of July before my freshman year. I lived in the Adams dorm on the seventh floor of the McCasland Tower (or, as called by her inhabitants, “Mac 7”). By the grace of God, my suitemate was Nicholas Anderson- a Beta legacy, the son of Nick Anderson and the brother of in-house member Zach Anderson. He was about to leave the dorm for the Beta House, and just randomly asked me if I was rushing, and if so, if I would like to go to the Beta House with him. As I had not gone through summer rush, no house was any different than any other to me at the time, so I accepted his invitation. By the time I made it from the curb of 800 Chautauqua through the main doors, I knew I wanted to be a part of the house. After meeting several members and signees (and also going to a party that night that was less than compliant with then-current IFC rules), my mind was made up, and I assume the members’ minds were as well. The next night at rush, I was given a bid card by my future big brother in the house, Matt Card (’01, #2354) of Ardmore. After I signed my bid card and put on my pledge bid shirt with BETA emblazoned across the front in a third floor room, I was taken down the stairs where I heard some of the most meaningful words I’d ever heard, “Brothers, please welcome the newest pledge of the Gamma Phi Chapter of Beta Theta Pi, Matt Allen!” Like many of my pledge brothers before me, I was greeted with handshakes and a chorus of snaps.

My pledge class was unique in several different ways. First of all, we were the largest pledge class Gamma Phi had ever signed, and I believe also the largest pledge class ever signed at OU at the time. Our signed number was 72 as I remember, although I believe only about 55 made it through pledgship. Our pledge class comprised students from many smaller towns in

Oklahoma, including Atoka, Pauls Valley, Kingston, Pittsburgh (the one by McAlester), and others. We also represented what appeared to be quite the recruiting coup, as the rush team of '98 (Joe Ford, Matt Blue, Fenton Sanger, and Richard Stafford) pulled highly sought-after rushees away from traditional powers Lambda Chi Alpha, Fiji, and Delta Tau Delta.

The Beginning of Pledgeship:

The pledge class was formally sworn into fidelity to the House in a ritual. Some of the pledges knew what to expect, while still others had no idea what was about to happen. I do know that I thought I might have been in over my head when I saw the robes and candles, and was asked to swear sacred oaths in unison with my pledge brothers. This was the first experience any of us had had with a true secret society, and this ceremony really revealed a lot that we had not been told during rush. Of course, we were more intrigued and excited than nervous.

Pledge Routines

Some things never change around 800 Chautauqua, and of course, that's how we prefer it. Pledges were required to use the side door and side stairs, with only one exception: if an outsider is with you and compliance with the rule would raise suspicion. Of course, the members almost always disagreed with a pledge who dared break the rule under the guise of avoiding breach (which, as we all know, is spelled H-I-S-T-O-R-Y). The House was always "dark" to pledges, unless given explicit permission to the contrary by a member. The pledges met for study hall Sunday night through Thursday night for three hours a night. This was a very necessary procedure, of course, as Beta pledge activities would otherwise often cut into study time. Pledges also met for intramural practices, whether it was flag football or basketball. Every Sunday and Friday night, the pledges would report to the house en masse in our "pledge uniforms", which consisted of jeans, tennis shoes, and white t-shirts. Belts were optional, but if one person had one, you had better hope everyone had one. Our pledge class exhibited an amazing amount of organization, thanks mainly to the efforts of pledge class president Matt Pollock of Duncan, pledge class vice-president and legacy Cody Fleming of Enid, and pledge class treasurer Steven Nereus Carter of Lawton. Other pledge class leaders such as Rob Cunningham and uber-legacy Michael Elder deserve mention here as well. The most feared upperclassmen were undoubtedly David "Uncle Dave" Harris, Matt Titus, Aaron Glover, and the occasional visit from Sam Eiser. That Dave Harris became one of the best friends to my pledge class is worth noting here. Also, the updates from Fenton to Cody Fleming were invaluable...more than one pledge meeting began with Cody saying, "Guys, I just got off the phone with Fenton, and...."

Of course, the pledge routine is not the only part of the history of any group of men that walked through the doors of 800 Chautauqua. Other random thoughts come to mind: helping Mom Overton with whatever manual labor she requested. Although that sounds mundane, Mom Overton orchestrated many memorable special days, most particularly the Christmas auction. Mom also held some etiquette classes for the pledges...which were much needed. Work Weeks were also fun, as the live-in members would band together to do annual home improvement projects while watching the incoming crop of freshman girls walk around north greek for formal rush.

Living In

By the time my large pledge class moved into the House, the rooms were basically packed with people, posters, pictures, couches, desks, computers, and TVs. The second floor rooms were all two-room suites, each with a rack room and living area. The only exceptions to this rule are the larger corner rooms on the NW and SW corners of the second floor, which were bigger versions of the other rooms. The biggest two rooms housed four people, unless three upperclassmen could garner the points to beat 4 younger members in room draw. The rest of the rooms almost held three people (even the “Mole Hole”) that year, with only a couple of rooms holding two. The upstairs rooms were all two man rooms with the exception of a couple that had to hold three just to fit the large pledge class. The close quarters were uncomfortable at times, but some of the best memories were also made in this fashion, including the nicknaming of Wade “Hurricane” Kovash.

Some of the more interesting developments during this time were directly linked to technology. Of course, personal use of the internet began to skyrocket in the mid-90s, and the pace of being “wired” has not yet slowed. Apple computers starting making headway into the personal computing market, with the release of the iMac and various other laptop and desktop computers. Another focus of the time was Napster, which was a file-sharing program that allowed an end user to search for and download songs in that format that was new then, but familiar to all now: MP3. Also, the ability for personal computers to “burn” a CD, be it normal data or music files that allowed for a music lover to make their own CD, became more prevalent. The switch to DVD players from VCRs had already begun in 1998, but younger consumers were beginning to be able to afford DVD players during my tenure in the house.

Pop Culture

The culture of 1998-2002 was not really particularly notable when compared to more vibrant times. I am sad to admit that people my age were buying CDs created by “artists” that mixed heavy metal rock with rap, with dubious results at best. Popular music artists were the Dave Matthews Band, Limp Bizkit, Jay-Z, Fuel, Pearl Jam, Stone Temple Pilots, Stroke 9, Third Eye Blind, Tim McGraw, Weezer, Counting Crows, 2Pac, Incubus, Barenaked Ladies, Blink 182, Blues Traveler, Bush, Busta Rhymes, Pat Green, Outkast, O.A.R., Nelly, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott, Jason Boland, the Dixie Chicks, Beck, Ben Folds Five, Coldplay, Creed, Eminem, Fiona Apple, the Flaming Lips, the Foo Fighters, John Mayer, Greenday, Jack Johnson, A Perfect Circle, George Strait, and Norman native Mike Hosty. Unfortunately, in addition to the rock-rap fusion, there was also a resurgence of bubble gum pop that the sorority girls listened to: Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, N*Sync, Backstreet Boys, 98 Degrees, Jessica Simpson, and the like. Of course, the rap and rock music was usually associated with hall parties and the country music was generally associated with Barn Dance (especially David Allan Coe’s Greatest Hits!).

Popular TV shows included Seinfeld, Friends, ER, the Sopranos (which more than one person regularly skipped chapter to watch), and the harbinger of mainstream reality TV: the Survivor

series. South Park, which was aired exclusively on the cable channel Comedy Central (thus allowing it to be particularly raunchy) also became a huge hit.

The standard fraternity man wore khaki cargo shorts or slightly torn-up jeans, a date party tshirt, and a once-white hat from Balfour with BETA or the letters across the crown. The interesting part of this was that the style was that the hat must be dirty. Sweat and dirt stains and a fraying bill with a hard arc bent into it so that it resembled an upside-down 'U' usually were evidence of just how much character you and your hat had. French blue button-up shirts from Harold's were popular, as well. Also, for a very brief period of time, visors came into style for the men, as well as Capri pants. Thankfully, not many bought into the Capri pants, and they did not stay on the scene long. Flip-flops were also worn everywhere, with everything, and as late into fall as weather would allow.

During my time in the house, 9/11 occurred. I remember it clearly, as I was at work that morning and called to my roommate and pledge brother Kevin Dare to wake him and tell him to turn on the news. Classes were never canceled, but the next two days in class were basically just discussion about the world caroming around us in what seemed like such a small town at that moment.

Another tragedy had preceded 9/11, and that was the May tornado of 1999 that swept from Chickasha through Moore and Midwest City. Pledge brothers Nicholas Anderson, Bryson Varner, and Scott Hawkins drove up to see the wreckage and ended up helping pull people out of the rubble.

Social Chair

During this era, OU's greek houses were not dry, so most of the younger greeks participated in the long-standing tradition of the hall party. Almost every Thursday night, fraternities would throw parties in their respective houses, and males friends of the members and pretty much any girl were invited. The halls would be filled with people trying to shuffle by each other, and most rooms had personal guests of the tenant inside listen to music and talking. The basement was used as a dance area, and a DJ would be set up at the north end of the room. Although the Beta House was not the best layout for large parties with hundreds of people, the girls and friends of Betas all flocked to 800 Chautauqua nevertheless.

More formal date parties, such as the beloved Barn Dance, were also held in more traditional fashion. During this era, we witnessed the last of the Beta Barns to be built on the basketball court, as pressure from the University and Norman Police Department made the tradition nearly impossible to observe without getting into too much trouble. However, the tradition was fully observed at least twice from 1998-2002. Four sororities were chosen to come over to the House on consecutive nights, Sunday through Wednesday of Barn Dance week. Each night, one of the sororities would come over bearing gifts and to mingle with the pledges out on the basketball court, who were building the Barn that needed to be completed by Saturday. As added incentive, the sorority that "rolled out" the most was awarded with an invite to the Jellorama function held in the spring. On Thursday of Barn Dance week, a hall party was thrown, and was generally understood to be a member or pledge's last chance to secure a date for the rest of the weekend.

On Friday, the members left the house to the pledges to take their dates out for a hayride while the pledges got to inhabit their big brothers' rooms to entertain their dates in the house without the watchful eyes of the members. The week culminated on Saturday, where a large date party was held at the House, both inside and out, with a country music act playing in the Barn built by the pledges.

The Loving Cup Formal was also a favorite date parties. The men would rent tuxedos, the women would be dressed to the nines, and more than one limo would wait in front of the house to cart around groups of dates going to dinner before the formal party. Victory party, signaling the beginning of football season, was the first actual date party of the year.

Besides activities at the House, Betas could be found out and about in Norman at large. A favorite tradition was Monday nights at O'Connell's to watch Monday Night Football and enjoy discounted buffalo wings and pitchers. The recent renaissance of Campus Corner began around 2000, and we took advantage of that. The typical weekly social calendar revolved around the best drink specials and perhaps more importantly, the whereabouts of the sorority women. A common Tuesday night hangout was the Vista on Main Street for bingo. Wednesdays were dominated by drown nights at both Brother's and the Red Dirt Café, both on campus corner.

Oklahoma Football

The years of 1998-2002 were some of the best that Oklahoma football has ever experienced. Coach John Blake was left go by the university after the dismal 1998 season. After OU completed their coaching search, I remember asking "where's this Stoops guy from again?" Of course, Coach Stoops would immediately make a name for himself. After a 7-4 season in 1999 (with losses to Texas and Notre Dame, with several members of my pledge class making the long drive to South Bend), Coach Stoops did the unthinkable in 2000 by leading the Sooners to an undefeated season and unanimous national championship by defeating Florida State in the Orange Bowl. The Beta men were, of course, engrossed in the 2000 season. In fact, it was two Beta men that first put oranges in the Seed Sower statue on Lindsey Street. None of us will forget Red October, when the Sooners beat Texas, Kansas State, and Nebraska back-to-back-to-back. Nothing felt better than the 63-14 drubbing of the hated Longhorns in the cool October rain in the Cotton Bowl. Plenty of brothers made the drive to Miami, Florida, to watch the Sooners ultimately triumph against Bobby Bowden's Seminoles.

Some of the men made the drive in 1999 from Norman to South Bend, Indiana, to watch the Sooners take a halftime lead, only to ultimately lose to the Irish in positively miserable weather. Still younger brothers made the trip from Norman to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to watch Stoops' players pull out a gutty win after a fake punt in Oklahoma territory against the Crimson Tide. Every Big XII venue was visited over the years by at least a handful of Beta men (except possibly Iowa State?) Whether it was waking up to Boomer Sooner blaring in the halls of the House when playing Nebraska in Norman, huddling around a television to cheer the Sooners onto victory in foreign territory, staying up all night to complete a float for Homecoming, or welcoming Beta alumni back to the house for a cold beer and fellowship on a home gameday, Oklahoma football was, and is, a fundamental pillar of the culture of Gamma Phi and the University.

Our pledgeship was particularly fun and memorable. Some random thoughts come to mind:

The members once kidnapped out pledge brother Travis Caves and held him “hostage” on the upper floors of the House. Although the members presumably wanted to fend off physical attempts to reclaim Travis, our pledge class leapt into action once we received the “ransom note,” which as I remember consisted of pizza and beer. After taking up a collection- or maybe we had the money in our checking account thanks to the meticulous treasurer Steven Carter- we produced the desired items. When we finally got Travis back, we figured he would have been hazed into the ground...but as I recall, he had been basically hanging out and drinking beers with the members and endured roughly zero discomfort.

A small group of our pledge class also stole the Beta composite right out from under the members. The side door to the house was almost invariably propped open so that girlfriends or pizza men could get in the house after dark. Three pledges snuck in the side door, took down the current composite, and walked right back out the side door with it. The composite was delivered to pledge class president Matt Pollock’s room, where it stayed until after we were initiated, as we wisely feared retribution should the members find out we took it. To the members’ chagrin, the new initiates proudly planted the composite in its rightful place AFTER initiation, which was on February 12, 1999.

One acronym of which only my pledge class might note the significance: TSOM.

In closing, I would like to make special note of my pledge class’ accomplishments to present. As I make a quick count, no fewer than 20% of my pledge brothers currently hold postgraduate degrees, professional degrees, medical degrees, or are entrepreneurs. I am particularly proud of my pledge class, particularly as we move forward into our late twenties, as we become doctors, lawyers, business owners, “academians”, spouses, fathers, and most germane to this writing, even closer brothers.

Affectionately Submitted
Matthew J. Allen ‘02
~kai~ 2367