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'I've Seen Terrible Things': Lawyer Predicts Spike in Hazing Suits

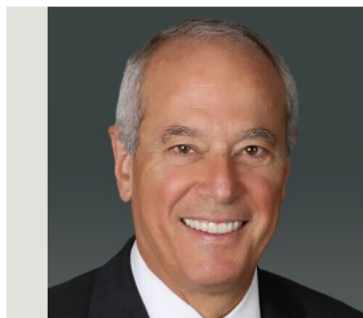
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By Lisa Willis

Hazing, a long-standing initiation ritual that often involves humiliation, continues to cast a shadow over educational institutions nationwide. From high school hallways to college campuses, hazing has caused death and injury.

Now a top litigator is gearing up for a volley of suits, especially in light of a new law that holds some colleges responsible for reporting hazing. The attorney predicts hazing litigation will increase now that President Joe Biden has signed the Stop Campus Hazing Act, a federal law that requires greater transparency at colleges and universities.



David W. Bianchi of Stewart Tilghman Fox
Bianchi & Cain. Courtesy photo

And across the aisle, the defense bar is also preparing for vigorous litigation.

Miami attorney David W. Bianchi has taken on litigating some of the more high-profile incidents over the years, and he stresses the need for a more significant crackdown on the Greek life ritual that often turns deadly.

Bianchi, of Stewart Tilghman Fox

Bianchi & Cain, has been a trial lawyer for 45 years. He said his life's mission has been to advocate for victims and their families, seeking justice and pushing for transformative legal reforms. His cases have made him a national leader in hazing litigation.

"I've been heavily involved in fraternity hazing cases all over the country for over 25 years, and I've seen terrible things. I've seen death. I've seen brain damage. I've seen life-changing injuries," Bianchi said.

But news of the latest hazing incident in California touched him deeply.

"Never, ever have I seen a case where a pledge was set on fire," Bianchi said. "This is a new low, a new level of outrage, and it makes me sick."

Bianchi is referring to the Jan. 7 announcement that the San Diego District Attorney's Office criminally charged four members of a San Diego State fraternity in a February 2024 hazing incident where they set a pledge on fire, prosecutors said.

It's the latest chapter in the troubled history of fraternity life not only at California colleges but at so many schools across the country where fraternities have gained a reputation for dangerous, alcohol-fueled hazing. Bianchi wants to put a stop to it.

"Despite everybody's best efforts to stop all of this hazing madness or fraternity-related madness, President Biden, on Christmas Eve, just signed the Stop Campus Hazing Act, which is the first federal law ever to try to do something about hazing at our schools and colleges and universities," Bianchi said. "We'll see what the impact is. Time will tell. But it's a good step in the right direction. More needs to be done."

Bianchi said the new federal law needs to go further.

"In my opinion, this, while a step in the right direction, does not go nearly far enough. The only way you're going to stop hazing, or at least substantially curtailing it, is to be much more serious about punishing the bad actors," Bianchi said.

Confidential Settlements

The case of Antonio Tsialas ended with a confidential settlement in 2019.

Bianchi represented the family in court.

Tsialas, an 18-year-old Miami native was accepted at Cornell University in 2019, but in October 2019, after attending an on-campus unregistered fraternity rush party at Phi Kappa Psi, he was found dead at the bottom of a gorge. He was a victim of fraternity hazing, Bianchi said.

The lawsuit named Cornell, the fraternity and several Cornell students as defendants. Bianchi's firm brought the suit, which was settled before trial. There were several counts of negligence and liability charges filed against the defendants in the suit.

In another case, in 2004 Bianchi secured a \$14 million jury verdict for the parents of Chad Meredith, an Indiana resident recruited to play baseball at the University of Miami.

"He came down to play baseball, and he never made it home for Thanksgiving because the fraternity president and vice president drank with him until three o'clock in the morning, and then the president announced tonight, we swim the lake, which meant they were going to swim across Lake Osceola on the UN campus," Bianchi said.

Meredith drowned.

"I told the family, we're going to do more for you than just get you money," Bianchi said. "I want to change Florida law to make the existing law better than it currently is."

And in 2005, the Chad Meredith Act became law.

"Now, in the state of Florida, following the passage of the Chad Meredith Act, the consent of the victim to participate in the activity is no longer a defense," Bianchi said. "If you're criminally charged with hazing in the state of Florida, you cannot raise as a defense 'the victim consented to participate, so therefore I'm not guilty.' That defense is gone."

The law also eliminated the defense that the hazing event was not an officially sponsored fraternity event.

"I went to the Legislature, and I testified in support of this legislation that I drafted. I brought Mr. and Mrs. Meredith down from Indiana, and they testified along with me, and it passed the House and the Senate unanimously. Jeb Bush was governor at the time and signed it into law on the UM campus where Chad died," Bianchi said.

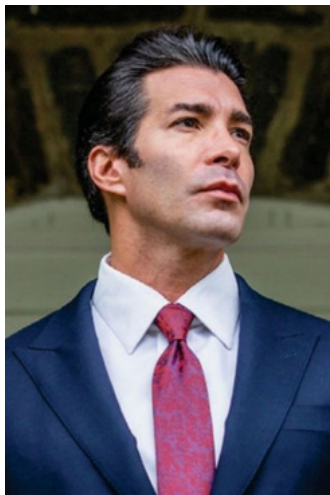
His dedication is not only to holding perpetrators accountable but also to making systemic changes in how such acts are addressed—or often ignored—by schools and organizations. "Hazing is not just a harmless tradition; it's a serious issue that ruins lives," Bianchi said.

Another notable Bianchi case was Coffey v. Pi Kappa Phi, where Florida State University student Andrew Coffey died of alcohol poisoning during a fraternity pledge in November 2017, court records show. Following that litigation, Bianchi drafted Andrew's Law and lobbied for its passage. That law provides immunity from criminal prosecution to the first person to call 911 during a hazing incident.

Defense Side

According to author and hazing researcher Hank Nuwer's calculations, the U.S. recorded at least one school-, club- or organization-related hazing death every year from 1959 to 2021. The first was in 1838.

For every death or injury, there could be many individuals involved in litigation.



Joseph D. Lento of Lento Law. Courtesy photo

Joseph D. Lento of Miami's Lento Law Team is a criminal defense attorney who has represented students accused of hazing. He said defense attorneys and professionals must advocate for and ensure that all students are provided their due-process rights in these matters.

"Among other issues involving hazing and its potential consequences, we have helped countless clients with hazing defense at countless schools across the United States," Lento said.

"While the new Stop Campus Hazing Act focuses heavily on the reporting requirements for institutions, the act also impacts how students accused of hazing and similar

activities need to be defended in school discipline matters," Lento said. "Like any student discipline issue, there needs to be a balance between transparency, which the act calls for, and protection of the students' rights. Ensuring that students receive proper due process and the opportunity to defend themselves is critical, especially in cases like hazing incidents involving many people and heightened emotions."

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Bianchi thinks incidents such as the cases he has gone to court over and the most recent San Diego incident should never occur.

"These guys need to be immediately expelled from the university, kicked out of the fraternities, they need to go to jail," Bianchi said. "It's so outrageous that we all need to get together and say, enough is enough."

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By Lisa Willis

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