

**Acceptance Speech of William G. Tragos
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BEYOND PHI BETA KAPPA

I'm really happy we are in Chicago—about 100 years ago my paternal grandfather arrived in this city from Greece and found work in the steel mills of nearby Gary, Indiana. My Dad was raised here and today my beautiful 20-month old granddaughters Bianca and Indigo live here with my daughter and son-in-law.

But despite all those happy Chicago connections, I was born and raised in St. Louis and feel no compunction to change my Cardinal hat. (Bill puts on a St. Louis Cardinals baseball hat.)

It's been just a few hours since I've been elected, but I've been thinking about SigEp a long time and want to share my thoughts.

Over the next two years we will be preparing to celebrate our Centennial. Our first 98 years have seen SigEp become America's preeminent fraternity.

For nearly two decades, 17 consecutive years, $\Sigma\Phi E$ has been selected as their fraternity by more men than any other. Quite a performance.

And yet, as Norm told us Thursday night, despite booming college enrollments and a booming economy—for the last seven years the number of men joining fraternities is in steady, year-after-year, decline. SigEp may be falling less rapidly than our peers but we, too, are dropping.

Oh we've seen more dramatic declines—but they were during WWI, the Great Depression of the '20s and '30s, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the drug-hazed, anti-everything '60s and '70s. But we have never before seen declines in good economic times and strong undergraduate enrollment.

We, all fraternities, must be doing something wrong. And I think I know what it is.

In May, 1997, our dear Frank Ruck told a gathering of National Interfraternity Council leaders and I quote: “At the close of the 20th Century the basic motivation and ideals of our respective founders are long gone; we know that much is wrong and sometimes harmful with our Greek system. Focus on fun and entertainment dominates the culture of many, if not all of us, giving shallow lip service to our roots. The reality is that in far too many locations we do harm to our young people—and that realization really hurts.”

Yes, it does, Frank.

From my years in advertising I know that perceptions developed over time really do reflect reality. Although it has been a minority of Greeks – there's been enough stupidity repeated over many years that we have earned our current reputation. All of us.

The pejorative “frat boy” label pinned on anybody—from hard drinking ball players to presidential candidates considered intellectual lightweights—reflects an accumulation of years of ridiculous, hazardous, juvenile, irresponsible, and often illegal behavior.

For serious students, fraternities are viewed as a marginal anti-academic anachrony.

To many college administrators fraternities are an irrelevant nuisance. To many of our own alumni, an embarrassment.

Is it so difficult to understand the steady decline in the attractiveness of the Greek letter idea to young men entering college today? Is an organized society of friends an irrelevant, outmoded idea? Or have we betrayed our original purpose?

Robert Frost thought the saddest word in the English language was not disease, poverty, war, prejudice or even death—but betrayal. Think of the gravity of betraying one’s family, wife, friends, religion, principles, country—or oath and obligation.

Those of us here tonight, undergraduates, alumni, their wives, are SigEp fanatics for some set of reasons. Something happened to make us so. I know why I am.

Like you I learned things the classroom didn’t teach. How to sell an intangible idea like friendship in rush. How to lead a group of men by conviction and enthusiasm without any carrots or sticks. I got into advertising thanks to two SigEp alums. I made friends 46 years ago who are still among my very best friends. But there’s more. For me, the son of Greek immigrants, ΣΦΕ gave me a feeling of belonging, of being welcome and included in the American dream that I had never really felt before my initiation.

Each alumnus has his special reason for staying involved. And when you look in your heart, you do, too.

Alums here tonight and many thousands who are not, share this feeling of indebtedness to our Fraternity. That's why so many give their time, talent, and money. We work with you to avoid betraying our founding ideals, centered on Φ, and pass on this beautiful concept intact for the next generation of America’s leaders. It’s going to take many years of walking the talk of a virtuous life—of living it, to destroy the “frat boy” damage...

To do it we are going to have to do exactly what Frank Ruck told the NIC was needed. Not cosmetic, but major substantive change.

No Fraternity is better prepared or capable to effect change than SigEp.

Because we've innovated before, many times in our history, it's our heritage.

You know our many firsts. First national philanthropy, first professional headquarters staff to help chapters; innovations like resident scholars, the TIPS program, the National Housing Corporation, are but a partial listing of the things we did first, that step-by-step made us the best.

Of all our bright ideas there are two which stand out. They required great courage. Both happened in a span of about 10 years, from the late '40s to late '50s. They redefined Fraternities then, too.

The first was the handiwork of the Executive Director of the time, Bill Hindman, an Ivy Leaguer from the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Delta, ably assisted in Richmond Headquarters by our dear Frank Ruck, a graduate of the Big 10's Michigan Alpha Chapter.

These two men saw the booming college enrollments across our country after WWII, thanks to the GI Bill that gave more men than ever a chance at a college degree. They saw that this democratization of education would allow smaller state or private schools to grow and be able to support Greek systems. So SigEp was the first to go to campus after campus of formerly streetcar or mining or engineering or agricultural or teachers-only colleges. Most of those schools blossomed and so has SigEp. Seems obvious to you today, but it was revolutionary then. We did it. We did it first. We were copied and we shattered the fetters of exclusion of misplaced elitism which was the negative fraternity stereotype of that period.

And 40 years ago this week at the Conclave in Washington, D.C., this Fraternity, founded by 12 mostly Southern Baptist divinity students once again embraced change.

In 1959, five years before Selma, and to our everlasting credit, $\Sigma\Phi E$ became the first major national fraternity to reject the prejudices of the past and abolished all forms of membership restrictions, racial or religious.

Today you take this for granted, and this is as it should be, but it wasn't obvious then. It nearly tore this Fraternity apart. It was decided by young men like you in Conclave.

It was an experience many of us in this room shared and remember with pride and emotion. A great moment that bonded brothers from all parts of the country. Another reason why we're here tonight.

Again, the others followed. And, if we have climbed to today's preeminence since that day it's because we dared correct errors of the past. We dared to be, really be different. We held ourselves and $\Sigma\Phi E$ to a higher standard.

So, it is not chest-pounding pride but our track record that should encourage us to believe we can imagine an even greater SigEp...if we approach it in the same way, doing what we think is right for our $\Sigma\Phi E$.

Let's start by expecting more of ourselves. Let's be intolerant toward the "frat boys" among us who rob us of our dignity and destroy our caché. Let's work not on the sizzle but the steak, the product we offer young America. Not just with new programs—but a single-minded focus on living what we say we're all about—the Balanced Man ideal.

Somewhere along the line we forgot where we were going with the Balanced Man. It became a slogan, or a rush tool, or simply a performance criterion for winning a Buchanan Cup.

We forgot the meaning of the Balanced Man.

The ancient Greeks had an axiom "sound mind, sound body." It was believed the body's good health was vital because it was the vessel of the mind. They believed physical training was necessary to keep the body at its peak so that the mind could also operate at its best. And 2,500 years later modern medicine has come to the same conclusion.

These same old Greeks believed just as the body was the vessel of the mind—the mind housed your humanity. That you are what you know. That you had to exercise your mind for it to develop—just like the body.

They believed, like our ritual, that the pursuit of knowledge didn't end when you left academic walls but was a life-long endeavor and that, as your knowledge grew so would your wisdom, and thus your enjoyment of this life—your humanity.

And for them, as I hope for us—these knowledge seeking minds in healthy bodies offered the best chance of achieving not only a virtuous lifetime but a beautiful soul ready to approach God.

Balanced men will not poison their bodies with tobacco, drugs, excessive alcohol, will not be brutes to their fellow men with stupid hazing with meanness of any sort, will not disrespect women, will not allow hate to poison their view of their fellow man, hating because they are different—different race, different religion, different ethnicity, different sexual orientation—because Balanced Men know we are all in God's image.

And on that potentially demagogic and divisive issue of sexual orientation—just look at the good you did these past 48 hours. Another prejudice is no longer acceptable behavior for SigEps. And Balanced Men with their beautiful souls perform the good deeds of a Project America, of Habitat for Humanity, or teaching inner city youths, not to cover up, much less absolve shortcomings of how they live on a daily basis, but because good souls do good.

Chapters that practice the sound body and mind ideal win top scholastic and intramural honors on their campuses and Buchanan Cups here.

They recruit more of the best men than anybody because they live, don't just talk the Balanced Man idea. Their attractiveness is visible. We have more such chapters than anybody, but only 50 or 60 out of 260. Way too few to change perceptions.

Some people think the Greek letter idea is so sullied that the trend is and should be toward extinction.

But you know there are Greek letters we respect, like ΦBK. Why don't we dare set a new standard? That our Greek letters, in time, achieve a reputation that goes beyond ΦBK. Because Σ and Φ and E should.

ΦBK glorifies individual scholastic achievement. Grade point. Fine. When we're great, we match that and add the knowledge that comes from learning about ones fellow man by belonging to a large diverse group that knows one another well enough to call each other Brothers. True friends.

We need you to go back to your chapter and dare to talk about our Balanced Man ambitions, and idealism. To recognize where we fall short and act. Because before we can get the very best men on your campus interested in taking this journey with you, your chapter Brothers need to understand what the Balanced Man means for their lives first. What they need to work on to approach the Balanced Man goal.

Too idealistic? Only if you believe the idealism of the 12 men of Ryland Hall was. Only if the ritual's interest is its secretiveness. If the Creed is mouthed with meaningless words. Only if you think the Founders' idea of a new and different national Fraternity was. Brothers, we came along 50 years after most of our competition. And we rose to the top.

Too different from your competitors? Our Fraternity has always dared to be different. It's your heritage.

A couple of things you should know about me...

I think you know you elected a Greek Greek.

The poet Theocritus wrote in 252 BC talking about the Trojan war, something that has always encouraged me to develop a relentless approach to life's challenges. "The Greeks took Troy because they never gave up trying." So be assured this is not just a speech. We are going to go after our Troy, the "frat boy" stereotype. We will demolish that Troy. That's my Greek side. After 39 years of marriage to my wife, who is a Dane, I have also become a Viking by osmosis.

We are going to win. Not with more rush tools, or slogans, but really changing who we are—the quality of our humanity. Do that first, help each other focus on that relentlessly as the Greeks did at Troy and everything, all the growth and success we need, will follow.

And I promise you, as you tackle change, your older Brothers will be at your side. I will do my utmost to get the resources of our Fraternity behind your efforts. To focus those resources to add a tangible reality to the high ideals of the Balanced Man, and help you achieve them.

We can accelerate your understanding of the importance of what you put into your body, the poison of excess, we can dedicate space in our houses for exercise. We can encourage, sponsor annual physicals that measure, not how much you can bench press, but your cholesterol, blood pressure and get you into the habit of monitoring your health. We need to take big and small concrete steps to help you develop the body as vessel of the mind. We will.

And the mind—the pursuit of knowledge and the virtuous life. What can we do beyond bench-marking our scholastic performance against the all student GPA and the awards and scholarships we already offer? Can we really change, and foster environments in our houses that truly promote the sound mind?

We are all or will be wired for computers. But we need to go beyond that. Can we make our houses small college residences of 50 or 60 or 80 men with a professor or associate professor who lives with us, and his or her spouse, kids, and dog and whose presence helps

foster a more home-like and academic atmosphere all the time? Whose presence encourages the visits of fellow professors of anthropology, ethics or Phys. Ed.

And, instead of having these visits and dinners haphazardly, or as part of a brownie point count toward some award for being a good fraternity, truly change how we live, a pro-academic, pro-intellectual atmosphere that goes beyond the pursuit of the diploma or grade point. That seeks to expand the horizon of the mind. Helping you to your best expression of yourself. Would such an undertaking reignite our alumni, your Alumni Board, our NHC, our Foundation, to come up with the resources it takes to build and support such an environment? I bet it will. And we have the creativity to develop ideas that foster scholarship in chapters where we don't live together. Every SigEp gathering, from chapter meetings, Carlson Leadership Academies, and Conclaves.

As your new president I ask you to think, and act on all of this in the name and in honor of our past, our founders, and our 240,000 brothers. Certainly, but most of all in your name, for you.

In the spirit of the Balanced Man—the best you. Let SigEp be that society of friends that has grown to understand that with our Balanced Man we own a big idea that represents timeless values.

Our relevance for the future, our very existence is in your hands—and the hourglass is in front of us all.

May the Lord watch over each of us as we take leave one from the other. May we remember the fellowship of this great Fraternity that rejoices in its diversity, that looks down on nobody because they are different because we are all made in God's image.

May you go back to your campus aware of the chance you have to build a beautiful soul while developing your best humanity by truly understanding and living the balanced life of healthy body and mind. Relentlessly.

For it is time again to mind our very own knitting and prove to collegiate America that there is worth in Greek letters and that today's Sigma Phi Epsilon, this society of friends, of Balanced Men, by the actions of their daily lives honors *Virtue, Diligence and Brotherly Love* so much that they dare take up the challenge of massive fundamental change that dares to imagine that a goal as high as besting ΦBK is only our latest journey of change.

Such a Sigma Phi Epsilon is a product that will attract young America as never before, and thus permit SigEp to roar into our 2nd century.

Let's do that!

Thank you.