

## **Episode 4: The tragic consequences of hazing: Lianne Kowiak shares her story**

Courtney Bullard:

Welcome to The Law and Higher Ed Podcast. My name is Courtney Bullard, CEO of Institutional Compliance Solutions and your host. I'm a Tennessee attorney, and I began ICS after serving as campus counsel for eight years at a university system. In that role, I handled all legal matters affecting the campus, or as I like to say, I did everything but divorces. I bring that on-the-ground experience with me and working with clients today, and that experience shaped the mission behind ICS, which is to provide legally-sound but also practical advice to the institutions that we partner with. Today, I specialize in compliance with Title IX and related laws and regulations as a result of my experience in the area on campus since the Title IX boom in 2011. This podcast provides relevant, tangible information that you can utilize in your professional life right now, and even maybe your personal life. Through interviews with campus leaders and subject matter experts and informational episodes, you have access to information at any time, any day that has both legal and practical implications for your career and your campus.

So let's get to it. This episode, I sit down with Lianne Kowiak, a mother who lost her son tragically to hazing. Unfortunately, she's not alone. There's no central tracking system for tracking hazing deaths. There's been at least one university hazing death each year from 1967 to 2018. And Lianne shares with me some staggering statistics about those who've experienced hazing, not just in the college and university setting, but also in the K-12 setting. If you're a campus administrator and listening to this episode, I'm confident you're committed to ensuring your campus is a safe place for students.

It's easy to lose sight of the devastating consequences of hazing, bullying, sexual misconduct, though, even for me because we're so embroiled in our day-to-day work, which is why I wanted to interview her. Her description of her son Harrison as a person is so moving and her account of learning of her son's injury and then those moments when they had to make a decision no parent wants to make was, you will hear, it made me emotional. Listen as Lianne shares her story with me. So I am honored to have you as a part of my podcast. As a mother, I cannot begin to imagine what you and your family have been through, and your work since then is so important. So share with us your story.

Lianne Kowiak:

Well, Courtney, thank you very much for having me on the podcast today. If there's any way that I'm able to get the information out there to share my son's story and the dangers of hazing, whether it's media, live presentations, radio shows, and certainly podcasts, I'm very grateful. So thank you for taking this information and putting it on the spotlight for other individuals so they can learn about the dangers of hazing. My role or my focus today is certainly as a mother, as a parent. Let me preface it all by saying, Courtney, that I am not a hazing prevention speaker or an expert when it comes to hazing prevention. I am not a professional speaker, either, but I am a mother who is speaking from the heart this morning, and I will share in detail the events that led up to Harrison's tragic passing at the age of 19.

Courtney Bullard:

That'd be great. And I love how you preface that because, certainly, there are hazing "experts" out there, but the reason I wanted I talk with you is because it has hit so close to home with you, and I think that has such a tremendous impact in preventing future situations. So share with us a little about Harrison and what happened.

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah. So let me just first preface it by saying what the definition is of hazing. And I like to look at it, Courtney, as the difference between bullying and hazing. So bullying is all about exclusion, trying to keep someone out of a group or an organization, and hazing is all about inclusion, when somebody is trying to join an organization. And I like the definition that you've probably seen or may have seen on different websites, but the one that hazingprevention.org uses, of which I am a board member, is what hazing definition is in that it is an action taken or any situation created intentionally that causes embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule and risks emotional and/or physical harm to members of a group or team, whether new or not, regardless of the person's willingness to participate.

Courtney Bullard:

I like that distinction, too, because I think, as I said to you when we spoke before, bullying and hazing have become such a... or, bullying has become such a buzzword without people really thinking about what it means. And both are obviously extremely bad things that we don't want to have occurring, but the way that you explain that is very helpful.

Lianne Kowiak:

Good, good. Yeah, thank you. And there is a lot of information out there, as you know, regarding bullying. And even when you're watching TV, there's a lot of PSAs, public service announcements, that come on, and it's all about bullying. But frankly, you don't see a whole lot about hazing. So you had asked me, "Tell me a little bit about Harrison and his story." Harrison was just a wonderful individual in that when he walked into the room, he lit up the room. He was born in New Jersey, and then we moved out when he was in fifth grade or so to Northern California. And then at the end of his eighth grade, so just before starting high school, we all moved to Tampa, Florida, which is where my husband, my daughter, and I reside now.

And Harrison, when we moved to Tampa, Florida, he took to the game of golf. He was just spending some time with one of the neighborhood boys and just passing some time, and he really started to excel at it but enjoyed playing, so much so that in high school, he made the golf team and eventually became the golf captain of the boys' team here in Tampa at Wharton High School. And he was excited, and he said, "You know, I'm thinking of pursuing it in college." And so, we started to get a game plan around that.

He, and my husband and I, and our daughter, we are a very close-knit family, great, open communication. And like I said, he was very charismatic, and he had a heart of gold. For examples, a couple of stories come to mind just real quick. When he found a \$20 bill on the golf course that he was practicing at, he didn't pocket it, but he brought it up to the lady that sells beverages and some hot dogs on the golf course. And he said, "Somebody dropped this." And she just really thanked him and said, "You know, that's why I like to work here because you guys are just really on the up and up and just so honest." And she appreciated that.

So the other story that I wanted to share, it was just, again, typical of Harrison's giving nature, is when he was going to high school one day and he had a bag under his arms. And I said, "Harrison, what's in the bag?" He said, "Oh, don't worry about it, Mom." I said, "Harrison, you got something there." And he says, "Well, you know what? There's a kid at school, his sneakers are not in good quality shape, and they've got some holes in it. And I've got a couple of pairs of sneakers that are still in decent condition, and I wanted to give it to him to use." So-

Courtney Bullard:

Wow.

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah, it just warmed my heart, and that was just the type of person that Harrison was. So when I think about it now, and the golf, and how he was involved in it in high school, we had that conversation amongst the family, and he said, "Mom and Dad, you know what? I really want to play golf during my freshman year. I don't want to sit on the sidelines." So that changed our whole strategy in terms of looking for a college, a university where he might be able to potentially, hopefully get a scholarship.

But certainly, he had to have a good rapport relationship with the golf coach, and we started to tour the different schools around the country. And Harrison landed with Lenoir-Rhyne University, which is in Hickory, North Carolina, about 40 minutes from Charlotte. And we were so fortunate and blessed. Harrison was able to get an academic as well as a golf scholarship at Lenoir-Rhyne University, and we were so proud of him, he was so excited. And I remember when we got him his first used vehicle, we wanted to get him a safe car. We actually bought him a used Volvo. And first thing that he did, Courtney, was to pick up his sister from the elementary school and take her out for ice cream.

Courtney Bullard:

Aww.

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah.

Courtney Bullard:

We have a driver now, and it's definitely a... It's different.

Lianne Kowiak:

Aww. Oh, I bet, I bet. Well, I just look at Harrison and Emma and that brother-sister relationship, and I just know that they were so close. She looked up to him like he was the ultimate big brother that just looked out for his sister, always just coaching her, and encouraging her, and saying, "Come on, you can do it." And he was constantly checking on her. And you know what? They were just so, so close, which I'm so grateful for. But Harrison decided to go to Lenoir-Rhyne University, and it was during his freshman year, and he just knew he had to keep the grades up first and foremost. He wanted to maintain that academic scholarship, but he also wanted to play golf and keep that athletic scholarship. So he practiced, practiced, practiced. He started making some friends on the golf team with the guys. And it was the summer, Courtney, between his freshman and his sophomore year, he was home here in

Tampa, and he brought up to us, "You know what, Mom and Dad? I'm thinking about joining a fraternity."

And I said, "Really? Why? Why do you want to join?" And he said, "Well, you know what? A lot of guys on the golf team are in Theta Chi, but they're going to be graduating, and they want me to carry on the legacy. And they think it'd be great, and they can watch over me, and maybe one day I could be the chapter president here at Lenoir-Rhyne." So I said, "Well, so long as you've got your priorities straight, the grades come first and then the sports, and if you feel that you can juggle it all." But I know we asked him, Courtney, I said, "Is it safe?" He'd go, "Yeah, I think it's safe. The guys have my back. Don't worry, Mom." So he went back his second year at Lenoir-Rhyne. I remember I went up for Parents' Weekend. It was late October/early November 2008, and my husband and my daughter were not able to go because she had a volleyball tournament here in Tampa, so she stayed back with my husband.

And I went up, and we just had a wonderful mother-son weekend. We really were not that familiar with North Carolina, so we went to Asheville and spent a day there and started to explore. And it was the drive back to the campus, and he said, "You know, Mom, I just have a few weeks left." And I said, "Oh, that's good. What's in store? What's going to happen?" He goes, "I really don't know." And I asked him the question again, "Is everything going to be okay? You'll be careful?" And he goes, "Yes, Mom, don't worry. The guys, they're going to take care of me, the guys from the golf team." And so, I remember telling him, "Oh, Harrison, well, you know what? We're going to see you Thanksgiving. We're all going to be together in Atlanta," because we were going to meet there, and we were all looking forward to it. I can tell you Emma was just excited as ever that she was going to be seeing her big brother.

Courtney Bullard:

I bet she was missing him. I think about that even now with my younger children when the older ones go to college, and I can picture it. The way you're describing it, it's like I can just picture it.

Lianne Kowiak:

Exactly. Yeah, yeah, especially when there's that close relationship and the-

Courtney Bullard:

Yes.

Lianne Kowiak:

At home, you're missing that individual immensely. But I do remember he said, "Well, we'll see you in a few weeks," and we gave that long hug goodbye, and I drove back to the airport to fly back to Tampa. And little did I know, Courtney, that that would sadly be the last time that I see my beautiful son Harrison, who we just don't forget. Not a day goes by that we don't think about all the happy memories that we've had with him, how he made us laugh, and just the impact that he had on individuals. And you think about it, it's a little over 10 years ago. We lost him in November 2008. But like I said, it's still very real, it's hard to believe that this is our life now. But it is, and that's my purpose today is because I want families, and parents, and moms to know that hazing is very real and that you need to ask questions, be engaged, have that communication with your child, and do the research on the organization that he or she is going to belong to.

Courtney Bullard:

And it sounds like when I listen to you, we're going through this, our children getting to the age of looking at colleges, and the way you describe Harrison being an athletic scholarship, an academic scholarship, it's like every parent's dream for their child, at least those that are in athletics, especially an academic scholarship. Basically he had the whole package. And the one thing that strikes me is a lot of times, hazing is associated with athletics, so this is a situation where he was in athletics, but what ultimately... where the hazing ultimately occurred was with the fraternity. But I imagine some of that was crossover between his, it sounds like, between his fellow athletes and the fraternity members.

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah. It's interesting because when you think about hazing and the groups that it mostly impacts, people think that it's mostly social fraternities and sororities. But quite honestly, it is varsity athletics and then the social fraternities and sororities. But it impacts so many different groups, like intramural sports, even service fraternity organizations, and bands. Even before kids are going off to college, Courtney, 47% of students are hazed in high schools before they enter college. And three in five college students are subjected to hazing. So the statistics are staggering, they're getting out of control ever since Harrison's passing. In fact, 2017, there were seven hazing deaths. One death is one too many, but in one year to have that many is mind boggling. How could we be going backwards?

Courtney Bullard:

Well, it's unbelievable, too, given that we're in a time where you have social media and a 24-hour news cycle, and all of these things are very much covered in the media. When you have a death or a hazing incident, it gets national attention. And yet, the statistics are still what they are.

Lianne Kowiak:

Exactly. Very true. And-

Courtney Bullard:

That's mind boggling to me.

Lianne Kowiak:

Yes, yes. And I will share with you, well, the horrible phone call that we received. But some of the activities, sadly, that Harrison endured, and then the horrible night during hell week, and how he lost his life. But this is every parent's worst nightmare, Courtney, right? You don't expect to send your child off to college and not have them come home. And this was that phone call that we received. It was in November of 2008. And it was a phone call from his big brother, and he said, "Mr and Mrs Kowiak," because we were on the landline, they said, "I'm so sorry to have to call you so late, but there's been an accident." And I said, "What's going on? Where's Harrison?" And he said, "Well, we were playing football on campus, and Harrison tried to catch the football and landed down hard." Courtney, that is the first version of the story. The story evolves.

And so, I said, "Well, where are you?" And he says, "Well, I'm here at the hospital near Lenoir-Rhyne. You want to talk to the doctor?" So I said, "Yes, please put him on." So the doctor, the surgeon, he said, "Mr and Mrs Kowiak, we are going to airlift your son to the trauma center in Charlotte,

North Carolina, so that he can be operated on. We just don't have the facilities here, and we want to make sure that we're doing all that we can. Make your plans to get up to Charlotte." So the next morning, I jumped on the first flight to get to Charlotte. Because we didn't know the severity and what we were dealing with, we didn't want to alarm his sister, who was like 10 years old at the time. So my husband stayed back with her, and at the airport, the big brother and another brother picked me up. And I could see that they were disheveled, they just were really grimy, their clothing had a lot of mud on it. Looked like they didn't sleep all night. And I said, "Well, where is he?" And, "Let's go."

And they bring me over to the trauma center, and that's when in the car ride, they said, "You know what? We were playing football, Mrs Kowiak, but it was off campus." So that was the second version of the story. I said, "Take me in to see Harrison." We go over to the hospital room, I'm there at the bedside, and I'm saying, "Harrison, Harrison, Mom is here. Can you hear me? Mom is here." But, Courtney, he was unresponsive. He was tied up to so many tubes, and he was just laying there. And when the doctor, the surgeon came in to talk to me and just let me know that this was very, very serious and grim, and they tried to relieve the swelling of the brain, there was so much blood, but there was only so much they could do, I just broke down. And I called my husband. I said, "Brian, you and Emma need to get on the next flight. We need to be together as a family."

So they flew up, we were together as a family. But I even asked my daughter Emma, and I said, "Honey, do you want to say goodbye to Brother? This is a very serious accident, and he's... It's very serious, Honey." And she just said, "Yes, I do want to say goodbye to Brother. I want to hold his hand." And I'll tell you, Courtney, she is 20 years old now, and I'm so grateful that I gave her that opportunity so that she could have some sort of sense of closure to this situation with what she called... She always called her brother Brother. So there we were, and we were just kissing him, and holding his hand, and talking to him, and saying our goodbyes. I remember even my husband even had the foresight to think about trimming some locks of hair so that we could take it home with us. And I don't know what made him think of that, but he did.

Courtney Bullard:

Wow.

Lianne Kowiak:

And I remember... Yeah, even to this day, about a week after we came back, Emma was so sweet and she sewed... She just hand sewed some pillows, little pillows, and she put Harrison's locks of hair in each pillow for the three of us. And those, of course, are very special to us.

Courtney Bullard:

Wow. And I just... I'm in tears over here just because I think about my own daughters, my daughters call each other... My younger calls her older sister Sissy.

Lianne Kowiak:

Aww.

Courtney Bullard:

And just, I, as a mother, being in that situation and having the thought of allowing her to be there with him at such a young age is incredible.

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah. Well, I'm just so glad that she could make that decision and that she wanted to. Yeah, so there we were, and the doctor just said, "You need to make plans. Do you want to take him off of life support?" And I could not believe that we were in his hospital room by his side, having to make this gut-wrenching decision. It was something unfathomable. But after we talked to them and just knew that there was nothing more that could be done, we made that decision. And just before we were about to leave to go to the hospital, we said our farewells and hugged him goodbye one last time. And we decided that we needed to head over to the dormitory to go through Harrison's personal effects and if there was anything that we wanted to take back with us on the plane in the next day or two.

I knew that the university wanted to do a memorial service for him on campus, which they did. My husband and I, we were there in the room. His roommate was beside himself, just so upset and just devastated, and he couldn't even complete the rest of the school year. There was a knock at the door, and it was the big brother and the other pledge that was pledging with Harrison. You see, Lenoir-Rhyne is a very small university, and so, there were only five pledges, but they dropped down to two, Harrison and the other. And the two of them decided to stay in it just to support and be there for one another. And the big brother said, "Mr and Mrs Kowiak, before you hear it from anyone else, we do want to let you know that we were off campus, but it was actually a team-building activity." And when they left the room, I just looked at my husband.

And you know when your heart sinks, and you do that gut check, and something just doesn't feel right? And I said, "Team-building activity, what the heck is that?" Oh, my gosh. We were just in Harrison's room, just so upset, and we see on Harrison's bulletin board... Tiger Woods was pretty popular back then, and I thought there would be a class schedule up there. But on the bulletin board was a picture of his sister Emma and the essay that she wrote, "Who was the person that you most admire?" And she chose to write about Brother, and I hold those very specially in my heart to this day because they were, again, so close and always there for one another.

But I'll tell you, we just... Once the details came out, we were in shock what we had learned. That event was what they called running the gauntlet or bulldogging. And what that means is they had taken Harrison and the other pledge to the field about 20 miles off campus. It was very dark, there was no light out there except for the headlights from some of the cars that were on the side, but also just the moonlight. And they had asked Harrison and the other pledge, they were told they had to run from one end of the field to the other end of the field and touch the sacred rock. But unbeknownst to Harrison and the other pledge, they did not know that they would be tackled from the left, from the right by brothers who were wearing dark-colored clothing. So it was the element of surprise, but also, some of them were football players, so 250 pounds.

Now mind you, Harrison was a golfer. He never played tackle sports. He was 6'2", he was about 165/170 pounds, and when you're blindsided by that and you don't know what hit you... Harrison sadly, and the other pledge, were hit over and over, just tackled. Well, Harrison was hit one too many times, and he didn't get up. And they said, "Get up, get up." But they thought he was fooling around and joking.

And he didn't get up. Then they panicked, and they didn't know what to do. If there's one main takeaway from this podcast I want your audience to know is to do the right thing and call 911.

Courtney Bullard:

Immediately.

Lianne Kowiak:

Yes. Do not-

Courtney Bullard:

There's so many stories, too, of they panic, the brothers panic if it's a fraternity or whatever, and nobody wants to call 911 immediately because they don't know what to do.

Lianne Kowiak:

That's exactly right. They're scared, "Will I get in trouble?" No, don't waste those precious minutes. You can save a life. And frankly, they were 20 miles off campus. There was a helicopter field very close by. So who knows if those precious minutes would have made a difference. They could have. We don't know. But they decided to drive him over to that regional hospital near Lenoir-Rhyne. And so, Harrison just had passed away due to those injuries. But it was just devastating, and the activities, Courtney, leading up to hell week are also just terrible. Ingesting peppery substances, having to jump into the garbage dumpster, which he was told you got to retrieve the golf balls that say Theta Chi on it. And there was another accident that was just about to happen, which was when they blindfolded him, told him to stand on a railing over a bridge, and they threw a big rock into the water, and they said, "Okay. Brother John has just fallen into the water. Now you jump in and you help him." Blindfolded.

Courtney Bullard:

Whoa.

Lianne Kowiak:

Can you imagine? That's another accident waiting to happen. So just as Harrison is about to move forward and jump, they hold him back and they say, "Well, you've learned two things. Number one, you do as you're told. And secondly, your brothers will always have your back." These are very real situations, but when you think about hazing, it could be blindfolding, it could be kidnapping, putting individuals in small, confined spaces. If you think about LSU, Louisiana State University, has been in the news in the past month. They had a hazing death there a little under two years ago, but then this past fall, they had hazings and now nine individuals were charged with a felony.

Courtney Bullard:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lianne Kowiak:

They have thrown their lives around... or, thrown their lives out. But what they did to the pledges was just unfathomable. Number one, they had them lay down on a bed of glass, shards of glass. They would

urinate on them, they would kick them in their body with steel-toed shoes. Who treats humans or individuals like that, let alone your "brothers"? So again, the hazing, it's atrocious, it has to stop. It can lead to death. People think, "Oh, it's just little pranks here and there, it's little h. But little h, little hazing, can turn into big H, big hazing right away.

Courtney Bullard:

Absolutely.

Lianne Kowiak:

And I know that at University of Louisiana, there was a international student who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was not involved in Greek Life. He was just walking back by himself from his friend's apartment back to his place, and he was hit by a car. It was a pledge who was so sleep deprived. So the whole thing is that people need to be held accountable. It's the universities, it's the overseeing organizations that are responsible, whether it's the NCAA or the organizations that oversee fraternities and sororities, it's the headquarters for these organizations, it's the students.

And I will tell you, the alumni and the parents have to play an active role. A lot of them have been in fraternities or Greek Life and they'll say, "Well, you know what? Oh, I went through this. This is just part of the tradition, the culture. So just stick it out. Don't worry, it'll be done real quick." I'll tell you, Courtney, Thanksgiving is a wonderful tradition. But hazing? Who needs to subject themselves and individuals to go through that and subject themselves to potential death? It's just not worth it. The hazing has to stop now.

Courtney Bullard:

My conversation with Lianne will continue in just a moment.

Speaker 3:

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Courtney Bullard:

I listen to you and I think there's so many touchpoints that need to be made in order to get the message out about the dangers of hazing. And some of that is, of course, students, parents. You touched on alumni, which is such a great point. You hear people all the time... Listen, even as a lawyer in law firms, there are things that happen with the new folks that come in that could definitely be defined as hazing. It's larger firms, but the answer you always get is, "Well, I had to go through that, so you have to go through that." Nobody wants to stop the cycle, or that's the feeling that I get sometimes is nobody

wants to stop the cycle, "I went through it, so you go through it. This is how we do things." Where do you think is the core of where things should start? Is it high school? Is it middle school? Is it... When do we need to start talking to our students, to our children?

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah. So definitely in high school. But sadly, Courtney, I hear of hazings in middle school. But the conversations do have to start early in high school because I hear from moms who are of high school students, and especially the athletes, that their son or their daughter has been subjected to hazing. And I received a phone call from a mom in college. Her son was in a fraternity, and she didn't want to get involved because of fear of any backlash, but she just needed someone to talk to. And I said, "Look, this is clearly hazing, and I will pick up the phone and talk to the president of that fraternity." And to that fraternity's credit, I will say that they the next day intervened, got in touch with the university, and that particular fraternity chapter was suspended.

So in this journey or this path that I'm on, Courtney, I never expected that I would ever be a hazing prevention advocate. But you know what? To keep my son's legacy alive and to ensure that other families are not subjected to this, it is so important to get this message out there. But I have met some outstanding people, whether they're in athletics, whether they are in fraternities and sororities, who are a right... and are doing the right thing. They're trying to get the word out there with hazing or they don't even condone hazing. They just want to do philanthropic work and give back to the community. Yes, there is a brotherhood or a sisterhood, but in their definition, they want to take care of one another. [inaudible 00:31:56] in Harrison's case, there are bad actors, and that particular chapter that year, there were some bad actors that just so remiss that Harrison was caught up in all of that.

Courtney Bullard:

How did you... I know we're bouncing around a little bit, but that triggered a question that I had earlier. Certainly when you all arrived and got to the hospital, you had no idea this... about all of the hazing that he had endured and how the accident happened. Or, it's not an accident, but how did all this come to light? Was it through the other fraternity members finally coming and admitting to what happened?

Lianne Kowiak:

Oh. It was once we heard that word team building, my husband and I, we looked at one another, and we just felt that that didn't sit right with us. What is that about? So then that's when we started to ask questions. When we were there at Harrison's dorm room, I wanted to have a meeting with the fraternity brothers, and at that point, some of the parents were starting to come from the other fraternity brothers and started asking questions and, "What was going on?" Then of course after that, we had hired a lawyer and there was an investigation with the university, with the local chapter, with the individuals that were there. Some of them were active on the field, some of them were on the sidelines observing. But I'm telling you to this day, do not be a bystander to hazing and do not participate in hazing.

And every time I go around and speak at universities across the country, I will say do the mom test. And simply what that is, "Is the activity that you're about to be part of or one that you are a bystander to one that your mother would approve of?" Or ask yourself this, "If the local TV station or CNN were to drive by and record the event, would you be okay with that if it was showing up on the

national news?" You have to ask yourself questions. And, parents, you have to have those conversations with your students, with your kids.

Courtney Bullard:

I think... I say all the time in my line of work with sexual misconduct and sexual assault, bystander intervention is, and that training, I think, is so critical. I think it's so hard for kids to speak up and do the right thing. They're not intellectually as mature as we are. But nonetheless, I've seen that be so powerful in preventing some serious stuff from happening when students... I say kids, K-12, or even college students are given those tools through bystander intervention training to prevent a myriad of things, including hazing. I think that's an excellent point, and I love the mom test, too. I talked to my kids about the mom test just with usage of their phones and technology, but I think that is a really good way to explain it to people.

In my work as an attorney, something that I work with schools on is the first step is always being on notice of something and then being able to do something about it. And I know in the work that I've done when I've done investigations involving hazing, and it was at the high school level, but the students did not tell their parents and did not tell administrators because of fear of retaliation or minimizing it, what was happening in their own minds and not realizing the true potential dangers that were involved. So from that standpoint, you were saying you all were a very close family. What advice do you give to parents as they talk to their children about this?

Lianne Kowiak:

Well, I think what you and I would do with our children is to ask those questions, do the right thing, and take the high road. And is the activity or is what you're being asked to do, is that something that you would be proud of? And I would ask that all students, but also the families, the loved ones do some research on the organization. There's a lot of colleges now that are being more transparent. So if you go to the college website and you go to fraternity/sorority life, you would be able to... not all schools yet, but more and more are getting this way, to see basically a report card. What type of infractions has the organization received? What are the sanctions, what have you? And so, it's really good to read up about that organization's background and what punishment did they receive to try to learn from that situation. And then Google that organization.

Hold the school accountable. Yes, there could be a hazing policy, but that's words on paper. Is it [inaudible 00:36:46] followed on? How current or fresh are you keeping hazing prevention in people's minds? A lot of schools have online training. There's schools that do presentations, like they'll bring in a speaker and they'll... In my situation, schools bring me in so that I can share Harrison's story, and it puts the face with, sadly, the individual that lost his life. But it makes it real to them because this is a mother talking about her son, and it's not just fun and games. It's something very real that sadly had happened. And there's a such a shroud of secrecy over hazing, so that's why I want to get the word out.

Courtney Bullard:

And that... Flipping that on the other side of things, I know you already mentioned, there are schools that I know take this seriously and are taking the right steps to do the right thing, and people that are in athletics or whatever organization that will take it seriously when it's brought to their attention. What is your message to organizations when they are put on notice of something? And the reason I say this is,

for example, I had an athletic team and a football coach say to me, "Listen, I had the boys, they were pillow fighting on a trip."

He said, "But I went in there and I said, 'No, no, no.'" And what they were doing was, of course, targeting the freshman football players when they were doing pillow... And he said, "I went in and I shut that down immediately. Okay, yeah, and they were like, 'It's just pillows, Coach. What's the big deal?'" And he said, "It doesn't matter. Things can escalate quicker than you could ever imagine, and I'm shutting it down now." But that's not every coach. There are coaches who will turn a blind eye that just... There are bad eggs, of course, but for those out there above and beyond the education and prevention when something... when you have a student who comes to a parent and tells them that something's happening and/or goes to an organization and tells them what's going on, what is your message there?

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah. So those individuals that sadly have either been hazed or a bystander to hazing, and they do the right thing, and they go to their parent or they go to the school, that takes strength and courage. To me, those are the true hazing prevention heroes, if you will. Yeah, because, again, they're leaders, but yet they could receive a backlash, "Oh, you told on us," or whatever. But you know what? That's what a leader does. That's an individual who takes risk and is willing to step up, and do the right thing, and take the high road. And to me, I applaud them.

So when those allegations are raised, that university or that coach better do something about it. Otherwise, they are going to be held accountable. There are more and more laws that are put into place that are stricter. I will tell you that in Pennsylvania after the Penn State hazing and Louisiana after the LSU hazing, those two states now have tougher laws. I am working on North Carolina where Harrison's hazing occurred. I'm talking to someone right now who's a representative, and I'm hoping that we'll have some good news within the next six months or so. But it's... The laws have to be tougher so that it will deter individuals from hazing. If they know that it would be a felony, then they're going to think twice about it.

Courtney Bullard:

Absolutely.

Lianne Kowiak:

Look at those nine people at LSU now have a felony charge. Before that law was in place, the new one, it could have been a slap on the hand. So now the lesson is learned. They, hopefully, have... They have learned the hard way, but now they know that... other individuals should know that if they are to haze, there are going to be some severe repercussions.

Courtney Bullard:

Absolutely. And it's life changing in a very bad way, obviously, life changing in the worst way ever imaginable for you and your family. But even those who engaged in the hazing, there are consequences that are far reaching that they're not always fully thinking about or, obviously, they're not thinking about. So, yeah, I think that's a really good point. And then from the standpoint of administrators being

on notice of something happening and not doing something about it, they will be held accountable at some point, and it could be as serious as jail time.

Lianne Kowiak:

That's right. That's right.

Courtney Bullard:

So it is... I know when we spoke before, just coming to the conclusion of everything, you mentioned... And I was reading online. You've spoken to over 8,000 students, you're an advocate, you're out there all the time. If somebody wanted to contact you and have you come to their organization or campus, how would they go about doing that?

Lianne Kowiak:

Yeah, so actually, they can email me at L-K-O-W-I-A-K at hotmail.com, so lkowiak@hotmail.com. I am also on the board for hazingprevention.org, so you can read about me and find my contact information there. But what I want the organizations to know is I will not charge any speaker's fee. I am not going to profit off of Harrison's tragedy. To me, that just doesn't sit right with me. And so, if any organization would like to donate, and that's wonderful... And what I like to do is pay it forward, and we've a Harrison Kowiak Scholarship fund, and that is also on the hazingprevention.org website. And with that, there's a institute, it's called Hazing Prevention Institute, that's held every June. Two years ago, it was held in Atlanta. Last year, it was held in Baton Rouge, and this year it will be held in Philadelphia. It just rotates to different universities. We bring together probably about 150 or so attendees to learn everything about hazing prevention in the hopes that they can put together their own hazing prevention model and bring it back to their campus or their organization.

With the scholarship funds, I am able to pay for their seat at the conference but also provide a travel stipend. So last year, I sent five scholarship fellows, and this year I hope to send at least five Harrison Kowiak Scholarship fellows because one person alone, I can't do it alone. 10 people alone can't do it. As they say, it takes a village, and we need everybody working on this collectively, which brings me to mention that is why there are four families, ourselves included, that are working and partnering with the hazingprevention.org, with the overseeing authority that oversees over 63 fraternities called the NIC, North American Interfraternal Conference, also the National Panhellenic Group. We're working with this organizations so that we can bring tougher laws state to state, also for education and to share these personal stories.

And people might say, "Lianne, how could you partner with them? The fraternity is what took your son's life away." And I always answer it by saying we have to break down these walls, these barriers. If we are going to have any type of progress when it comes to hazing prevention, then the two-way conversations have to start. We have to talk with the fraternities, with the sororities, with the athletic groups in order to get our arms around hazing. And so, we are all working together, and we are all trying to come out with legislation that will really deter individuals from even ever thinking about hazing someone.

Courtney Bullard:

I love that message because I think you're absolutely right. You have to go to the core, you have to work with those organizations. Fraternities and sororities aren't going away tomorrow, athletics teams aren't going away tomorrow. So you've got to find a way to ensure it's a safe environment for everybody if they're going to be a part of those organizations. And of course, it happens in many other situations besides just athletics and Greek Life. And when you said it takes a village, it struck me you have this village, but it's been created under such tragic circumstances. I know when we spoke to prepare for this, you mentioned different folks you go and speak with and, of course, these families you've partnered with. And sadly, it's all because they've lost a child.

Lianne Kowiak:

That's right, that's right. It's not a club or a group that we want any more members in, but we are there for one another because we've walked in each other's shoes.

Courtney Bullard:

Well, I really thank you for being so open about a very personal and tragic situation. And I really enjoyed learning more about Harrison and all that you're doing to honor his memory and to raise awareness and education to the dangers of hazing in order to save lives in hopes that another mother never has to go through what you've been through.

Lianne Kowiak:

Thank you so much, Courtney, again for doing the podcast and for interviewing me around Harrison's story but so that I can get the word out to other families about the dangers of hazing. Take care, and thank you again.

Courtney Bullard:

Thank you so much for listening to this episode and my conversation with Lianne. I knew I wanted to cover hazing as a topic in The Law and Higher Ed Podcast, but I decided to go at it from this angle because, as Lianne put it, putting a face to hazing is truly impactful, and it was certainly impactful for me in talking with her. I also wanted it as a part of The Law and Higher Ed Podcast because oftentimes, hazing is often sexual assault or sexual assault also constitutes hazing. They overlap very, very often, and I've seen it in many, many cases.

So for you Title IX coordinators out there listening, you could have a situation that presents itself to you as sexual misconduct, but it also may constitute hazing. And for you student affairs professionals or Greek Life professions, you may have a situation that's brought to your attention that is... presents itself as hazing but that's also sexual misconduct and may trigger some obligations from the institution. So I did want to point that out. Harrison's legacy is continued forward with his mother in such a beautiful way, and I hope that you took away as much as I did from our conversation.

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