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To Greek or Not to Greek

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The day had already left me exhausted, and I thought of all I still had to do in my first day at Iowa State. The elevator slowly jerked its way up to the eighth floor of Willow Hall, smelling like a week's worth of freshman movers. A flurry of activity greeted me as I stepped onto the floor I would call home. My resident adviser and a team of fifteen soccer girls had already taken up residence and made the place their own, celebrating the start of a new school year. I felt lonely already.

The feeling of isolation was expected, and it was what led me to the greek system in the first place. I had been contacted by a number of sororities the summer before my freshman year, asking about my interest in greek life. Amber Billings Belonging to a sorority sounded ideal - I would have a network of friends and a place to belong to.

Brian Tenclinger, assistant dean of students and director of greek affairs, says this is a common feeling among women who decide to participate in the six-day recruitment process. "The number-one reason people join is to have a sense of belonging to a strong, well-established, and motivated organization," he says. "Many feel overwhelmed because they come from a rural community and are faced with a culture shock when they come to a bigger town. Sororities can narrow it down with similar values and beliefs."

After unpacking a few of my things, my organizing was interrupted by knocking. Grateful for some human contact, I opened the door and was greeted by a friendly, blonde girl who introduced herself as Katie B., my Rho Chi, which is greek for "recruitment counselor." She invited me to have pizza with the rest of my group later, in the commons area.

She explained that after eating, the Rho Chis and their recruitment classes were going to take a walk through greek town to see the fourteen sorority houses and then head on to a pep rally.

Suddenly nervous and not yet ready to leave my room, I politely declined the pizza invite but assured her that I'd be down and ready for the walk. After Katie B. waved goodbye, I called my friend Mandy, who was also going through the recruitment process, and asked her if she was uneasy about the next day. She was nervous, too, but excited about her upcoming greek experience. I went to bed wishing I shared Mandy's confidence.

At the of the DAY, all I wanted was a meal, peace and quiet, and SLEEP.

The impromptu pizza party was just one of our Rho Chi, saying we would be visiting each sorority. She told us we wouldn't be spending much time at any of them, so we could dress casually and wear what we wanted. Still yawning, I re-emerged after about an hour, dressed comfortably in jeans and a T-shirt. I was surprised to find some of the other girls dressed nicely in khaki pants and tank tops.

For the sororities, the process of getting ready for the potential members is long and tedious. Krista Polking, Alpha Delta Pi chapter presi-
I was a freshman who wanted desperately to fit in, to be a part of the best. I pushed the down-to-earth members, the women like me, and pursued the sororities expected of me. But not for long.

The presentations at each sorority, which featured slide shows of the different activities that the house had been involved in the past year, filled me with a feeling of contentment. All of the women seemed to be so happy in the pictures, I was sure that I had made the right choice — I would make friends for life, and joining the greek system would be a great way to get involved. Most of the girls had even remembered my name as they welcomed me into their house.

When I walked into one house, I knew immediately that it was going to be different from the others. I met Anna* first and she started to show me around, telling me she remembered me from the first day's visit and instantly liked me because I shook her hand and I was among the few that wore jeans that day.

As I walked around the halls, it was hard to ignore the personality of each room — each woman seemed to have her own style and knew how to express it. One heavily decorated wall with a poster of the Beastie Boys caught my attention. I told Anna how much I loved the group, and she professed to be a fan too.

So I pushed the down-to-earth members, the women like me, to the back of my mind and pursued the sororities expected of me. But not for long.

When I finally found the houses on my list, I sat back and enjoyed the skits the members put on to show their spirit and enthusiasm. They were all funny, and some were really good, but the experience quickly became too much of a good thing.

Talking to Mandy, it sounded like the greek community had divided itself into its own stereotypes. There are three sororities that you could call the "popular" houses. These are the ones that most potential members have their eye on, crossing their fingers, and scribbling them at the top of their wish lists. And then there's the other end of the spectrum, the three worst sororities to join. These are the houses that inevitably end up with more spaces to fill than women to fill them.

I was shocked that the greek system would stereotype itself in such a juvenile way. The people I had met at the three "unpopular" sororities had the most down-to-earth members, a refreshing change from some of the other people I had met during the week. So what did I do? I was a freshman, wanted desperately to fit in, wanted the best. So I pushed the down-to-earth members, the women like me, to the back of my mind and pursued the sororities expected of me. But not for long.

Preference Night is the last night of the recruitment process, where all potential members spend one hour participating in a solemn ceremony put on by the executive members of the chapter. "The senior members get up and speak about what her sorority has meant to her," Tenclinger says. "Some alumni might be there to talk about lifelong membership and the history of the sorority. It's done at dusk to capture the moment of when our sororities were founded.
ed, when there was no electricity. It’s usually done by candlelight.”

I, along with the rest of my group, had narrowed my choice down to one or two picks. I knew by now that I wanted to be in Anna’s sorority, and this was my final chance to prove to them why they wanted me, too.

We were supposed to look our best on preference night, and everyone else in my group donned the unofficial garment of the evening, the quintessential little black dress. As I zipped up my own wine-colored dress and stepped into my heels, I was anxious to kill once and for all the feeling of loneliness I had fought during my first days at ISU.

With what I hoped was a confident stride, I headed to my sorority of choice, where Anna was waiting for me. She stood behind my chair in the middle of the largest room in the house, while the chapter president and other executive members lit candles and read excerpts from their chapter book.

The mood was a somber one as I followed Anna into her room. I could tell by looking into Anna’s eyes that she and the rest of the women were very serious about recruiting new members and truly wanted us to join.

After being in the house for an hour, we said our goodbyes and headed for our other choices. After an hour, when everyone had finished speaking, there wasn’t a dry eye in the house, and as I shuffled out with the rest of the teary-eyed group, some were still sobbing. I was never truly sure that the life of a potential member and sorority sister gathered on the central campus lawn, questions were running through each person’s mind. Will I get into my first choice? What happens if no one chooses me at all? Has this all been for nothing?

Once again, I was different from my peers. There was never a doubt in my mind what would happen to me that day—that I was going to be part of the sorority of my choice.

After a few minutes, Katie B. handed me an envelope and wished me good luck. Patience not being one of my best virtues, I held my envelope against the sky, trying to decipher what was written on the little card inside. I discovered that my wishful thinking had been right on the money. Now belonged to a sorority—the one of my choice. Katie B. chided me for cheating, but the rules didn’t matter anymore. I was in. Instead of feeling excitement for the moment, I could only breathe a sigh of relief that the whole ordeal was over.

What came next resembled a shuttle launch. There was breathless silence as the countdown began, and then came an explosion of noise. Suddenly, women were running in every direction, screaming, crying, jumping up and down. Working my way through the crowd, I finally picked out Anna and as I hugged her, a smile spread across my face—I finally had a place to belong to. All of us now sisters, we left central campus together and headed to the house, singing and celebrating all the way.

About two weeks later, a photographer came and took our headshots. It seemed to me a symbol of finality. I would have sisters, a house, and a community of friends for the next four years of my life. Maybe I should have known that the feeling of belonging to something bigger than myself wasn’t going to last.

I had never been truly sure that the life of a sorority sister was the life that I wanted for myself. And a month later, I began to realize there was life outside the greek system. I made friends with some people on my floor and started to feel at home for the first time in weeks. I tearfully called Anna and told her my decision after making the most painful and stressful choice of my life.

If I could do the thing over again—coming to ISU as an unsure freshman, feeling the need to belong, and joining a sorority to fill that void—I wouldn’t change it for anything. The short time I was a part of the house, I discovered the kind of person I was and realized what I needed. If I wouldn’t have gone through it, a part of me always would have wondered if it was something I should have done. And now I know.

As I returned to the dorms sophomore year and saw the newly initiated girls, a smile spread across my face. I knew the secret. No one can even begin to understand the experience of recruitment until you’ve been there...it was something that I’ll never forget.

This story is true. Any references to specific sororities in both photos and text are purely coincidental and are in no way connected with this story.

Amber Billings is a sophomore in journalism. Even though she said, “Alpha Beta No-thank you” to sorority life, she’s got nothin’ but love.

The Dos and Don’ts of Sorority Recruitment

“The recruitment rules are established to make sure that no sorority is ‘out doing’ another sorority,” - Brian Tenc linger

1. The sororities can only serve water based beverages
2. Potential members are not allowed to leave with items such as cups, napkins, party favors, etc.
3. Each visit can be a certain length
4. The 5 B’s cannot be discussed to a potential member:
   - Boys
   - Bars
   - Booze
   - Bible
   - Banks
5. More than two chapter members cannot surround a potential member
6. No potential member can be left alone in the house
7. Chapter members are not allowed to say anything negative towards other sororities which includes rumors and stereotypes

*names have been changed