

Back in Black (and Gray)

A house at 42 College Avenue was the site of a flurry of activity in late August. Suitcases were moved in, furniture was re-arranged and rooms were cleaned—all the “settling in” activities that occur when a fraternity house opens for the academic year. But this house was the site of something special—a group of students and alumni who gathered together to proudly hang the Greek letters “Phi Theta Phi.”



Those letters were last seen on Thiel’s campus in December 2002, when Phi Theta Phi, a local fraternity, was closed because of violations of Thiel’s student code of conduct. So how did the Phis return to campus? It actually all sprang from a joke, says junior Ian Meakim, one of the driving forces behind the push for a fourth fraternity at Thiel.

Last year, a group of male students approached the Student Life Office with the idea to start a new fraternity chapter on campus. The group wanted to participate in Greek life, but didn’t feel a match with any of the three existing national fraternities on campus.

After his unsuccessful participation in Greek recruitment in fall 2009, Meakim said he turned to a group of friends in the same situation and said laughingly, “We should just start our own fraternity.”

Meakim was joking at the time, but the idea stuck and the group soon approached the Office of Student Life with it. Initially, they didn’t want to bring back an old fraternity, said Meakim, but Dean of Students Mike McKinney and the Student Life staff encouraged the group to include Phi Theta Phi in their considerations. They met with John Hauser ’71, Thiel archivist, and an alumna of Phi Theta Phi, to learn more about the fraternity.

“The moment we walked out of the room [after meeting with Hauser], I thought ‘I want to be a Phi,’” said Meakim.

Meakim, along with juniors Evan Krizon of Franklin, Pa., Earl McCloud of Buffalo, N.Y., and David Owens of Polk, Pa., met with two national fraternities, but none felt as “authentic” or “welcoming” to them as Phi, said Meakim.

The group also attended a breakfast before the Phi Children’s Hospital Walk in December 2009. McKinney said that the students were impressed with level of support from the Phi Theta Phi alumni organization, which they felt was as good

as or better than the support offered by the national fraternities.

“The alumni have been great. I don’t think we would be here without them,” said Meakim. “It’s just been incredible.”

In fact, the Phi Alumni Association has morphed into the Phi Alumni Advisory Board. The board has taken on an expanded role in the resurrected chapter, serving as an oversight board for the chapter and its members much like national fraternities operate and ensuring that the history and traditions of the chapter are maintained and grown in a positive way.

“The moment we walked out of the room, I thought ‘I want to be a Phi’”

The Phi Theta Phi Alumni Advisory Board includes Gary Bonner ’80, Ben Burke ’99, Damon Dohar ’92, Albert Gesler III ’90, John Hauser ’71, Dr. Carl Hoffman ’69, H’10, Thomas Novak ’82, Todd Pilipovich ’00 and Gil Troutman ’75.

The Phi alumni conducted new member education with the newest Phi Theta Phi brothers in August and the chapter participated in recruitment this fall. Members recruited this year have the option to move in to the chapter house immediately. The chapter was looking for five to 10 quality new members, said Meakim, and they ended fall recruitment with four new members.

McKinney and the College administration note that the new chapter will even out the male and female Greek chapters and make pairing them up for events and service/volunteer work easier. It also will help Thiel increase the overall number of students participating in Greek life on campus in the future, which is currently at 25 percent.

“Whoever joins this chapter has the chance to really make it their own,” says McKinney. “These new Phis will be able to shape the way that the organization will grow in the future.”

The new Phis are continuing one very important “old” Phi tradition – the annual Walk-a-thon for the Children’s Hospital Free Care Fund.

Meakim said that he wasn't even aware of the Phis involvement with the Children's Hospital Free Care Fund at first, but was awed by their results over the years and is excited to participate in the 2010 walk, scheduled to begin Dec. 3.

The first Walk-a-thon was held in 1968 and raised \$1,100. In the 41 Walk-a-thons since, the event raised more than \$1.2 million for the Free Care Fund—that's more than any other single fraternity chapter in the world. The Phis have been recognized for their service by the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and the Pennsylvania Senate. In 2002, the Association of Fundraising Professionals recognized them as an outstanding philanthropic organization.

Todd Pilipovich '00, assistant director of admissions at Youngstown State University and a member of Phi Theta Phi, has served as Walk-a-thon chairman for the past five years, keeping the event alive through alumni participation.

"The Walk-a-thon has always been bigger than the fraternity; it's what made our organization," said Pilipovich. "For some like me, the Walk-a-thon is a life-changing event that is hard to describe."

When the fraternity closed in 2002, Pilipovich kept in contact with the Pittsburgh Children's Hospital Free Care Fund and discovered that in the one year without a Walk-a-thon the fund lost more than \$30,000. That fact helped him start conversations with other Phi alumni to form the Alumni Association and bring back the Phi walk.

Pilipovich will continue in his role as Walk-a-thon chairman this year, but will be shadowed by junior Shawn O'Hara, a new current Phi brother from Crafton, Pa., who will assist Pilipovich and lead the organization's fundraising efforts in 2011.



John Hauser '71, a member of the Phi Alumni Board, bonds with new Phi Theta Phi brother Ian Meakim during Homecoming 2010.

"With our chapter back on campus, the Walk-a-thon's future looks very bright," said Pilipovich. "Alumni participation will be up, the new members have creative and newer ideas on increasing our fundraising efforts and, most importantly, a unique tradition will continue to be passed down to other new members."

While Phi Theta Phi is an independent fraternity, the College gave the chapter a list of expectations, including collecting dues that are similar to the other chapters on campus, keeping their alumni base active and engaged, and maintaining scholarship and conduct standards.

"We plan to work very closely with the Phis throughout the year," said McKinney. "We want this chapter to be successful and be an integral part of Thiel's campus for many years to come."

The Phi alumni were notified of the chapter's return this summer in a letter from the Thiel College President's Office. One alumnus wrote with excitement about the news:

"It is great news that Phi Theta Phi Fraternity is coming back. My time at Thiel was special, but the brothers added an extra dimension during my time. The [Children's Hospital] Walk took me out of myself and into serving others. This was a life-changing event for me...On the Walk my senior year, I met a nursing student on a blind date. Patty is still my bride after 38 years. I walked 100 miles to meet my soul mate. Thank you, Thiel, and the Phi Walk-a-Thon."— Ken Kashner '71



Fast Phi Facts

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| Founded: | 1966 |
| Recolonized: | 2010 |
| Colors: | Black, gray and white |
| Principles: | Creed of fraternal bonds and code of honor and responsibility |
| Brothers initiated: | More than 500 |
| Alumni: | Living in 30 states with 143 in western Pennsylvania |
| Charity: | Phi Theta Phi Walk-a-thon for Pittsburgh Children's Hospital Free Care Fund |

A Brief History of Phi Theta Phi

In February 1965, Gerald Neri and William Scherer Jr. began to discuss starting a new organization at Thiel, a fraternal order corresponding to the Greek societies. A nucleus of six men was formed to perform administrative duties and establish a framework for the fraternity. However, a rift developed among the executive members and general meetings were discontinued after only three weeks.

Soon after, it was decided that a constitution, creed and code of honor and ideals were needed before approaching a general membership. With ideas in writing and a tentative framework compiled, general meetings were held and officers were elected. To help the group operate, Thomas Brazelton, assistant professor of biology and geology, and George Dickinson, instructor in sociology, accepted positions as advisers.

On April 7, 1965, a motion was put before the Student Senate to acknowledge Phi Theta Phi as the fifth fraternity on campus. The fraternity was recognized by a large margin. A week later, the constitution was presented to Student Government and Phi again gained approval.

Phi Theta Phi opened its first academic year on campus with a faculty reception held in its new house, the former West Dormitory. It followed this with a Hootenany Party, an Autumn Dance and many other social events. The men built a float to participate in Homecoming,

participated in all intramural sports, serenaded the women's residence halls, caroled with the other fraternities and participated in varsity sports and most extracurricular activities on campus.

The first pledge class of the fraternity consisted of seven men. Six activated. Phi Theta Phi's second pledge class was taken in February 1966 and consisted of eight men, seven of which activated.

The return of the brothers in fall 1966 found official recognition of the fraternity by the faculty awaiting them. The first Founders' Day celebration was held on October 13 to celebrate. Phi Theta Phi began its third year at 5 Roy H. Johnson Drive with 33 members.

It was not until 1968 that Phi Theta Phi was recognized as more than "a house organized for social activities." The first Phi Walk-a-thon for the benefit of Children's Hospital was held in February 1968, and netted \$1,100. The walk has become a tradition and is a cornerstone of the fraternity's life.

Phis continued to serve Thiel as members of athletic teams, class and student government officers, in the residence halls as head residents and residence assistants, as academic assistants and tutors, and as members and officers of academic and co-curricular organizations, keeping with the Phi creed of honoring and supporting the college and its organizations.

In December 2002, the Thiel administration, after the chapter

violated college policy, withdrew its support for the chapter and disbanded the fraternity. The Walk-a-thon for Children's Hospital, after 34 consecutive walks, was not held.

The 2003 Walk was held as an all-college event and raised under \$10,000. In 2005, Todd Pilipovich '00, took over the reins of the Walk, utilizing the Phi alumni along with the Youngstown State University "Ice Breakers," a student service group. That coalition continued the Walk for the rest of the decade.

In fall 2009, a group of undergraduate men discussed starting a new fraternity on campus. They chose to pursue re-colonizing Phi Theta Phi. The Phi Alumni Association convened an advisory board of 12 brothers, who prepared documents demonstrating how a volunteer board of directors could provide the same services to a chapter that a paid staff from a national fraternity provided. This included oversight for a revised educational program, fiscal responsibility and disciplinary sanctions if necessary. On February 24, 2010, the Interfraternity Council voted to approve Phi Theta Phi, with colony status, as the fourth fraternity on the Thiel campus. Approval from the dean of students and the president of the College came on April 9, 2010, and bids were extended to six men, five of whom accepted. The five were inducted into active membership on August 22, 2010.