

Bloomsburg U. fraternity, sorority sued in 2019 death of student from Montgomery County

by Susan Snyder

The mother of an 18-year-old Bloomsburg University freshman from Montgomery County who died in 2019 after attending a fraternity rush party is suing the fraternity, a sorority that hosted the event, and 36 of their members, alleging that they plied her son with liquor as part of an initiation process.

Justin King, 18, of Gilbertsville, was given liquor, including a mixture with vodka known as “jungle juice” or “blackout water,” participated in a “crate race” — a game involving large amounts of alcohol consumption over little time — and later fell down a 75-foot embankment, where he was found the next morning, says the wrongful-death lawsuit filed in state court in Luzerne County by his mother, Carol King.

“The defendants negligently and/or recklessly coerced, encouraged or otherwise caused unauthorized Bloomsburg University pledges, including freshman Justin King, to consume life-threatening amounts of alcohol,” the suit states.

Police have not filed charges in the case, and Columbia County Coroner Jeremy Reese had ruled King’s death accidental.

The Kappa Sigma fraternity and the Alpha Sigma Tau sorority are named in the suit; Bloomsburg University is not. After an investigation by the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, of which Bloomsburg is a member, the university permanently revoked the fraternity’s recognition and the chapter was later expelled from the campus, according to the suit. The sorority was suspended for four years.

“The passing of Justin King was needless and senseless,” Shanin Specter, one of the lawyers representing King, said Friday. “If only the fraternity and sorority leaders had followed the rules and the law, Justin’s death would have been prevented. We intend to seek the full measure of damages as well as appropriate reform.”

King was recruited to join the fraternity through a flier distributed in freshman dorms. University rules prohibit students from being recruited before they earn at least 12 credits, the suit said. King had been at Bloomsburg only three weeks before attending the Sept. 13, 2019, party.

King arrived at the sorority house at 10:42 p.m., and the party continued there until 12:05 a.m., the suit said. Then several fraternity members and about 10 prospective members, including King, moved to an apartment

known as “the Cloud,” where the party continued until about 3 a.m., according to the suit.

The suit alleges that King became disoriented from the drinking, was unable to find his way back to his dorm room, and fell to his death.

The lawsuit contends that the defendants violated the anti-hazing law enacted after the 2017 death of Tim Piazza, a Pennsylvania State University student who died after attending a booze-fueled fraternity party where he fell down stairs.

Lawyer Tom Kline, who is part of the same firm representing Carol King, has represented Piazza’s parents in a lawsuit against members of that Penn State fraternity, Beta Theta Pi.

In the King case, Kappa Sigma declined comment, and Alpha Sigma Tau did not respond immediately to an email seeking comment. Bloomsburg declined comment through a spokesperson. The university had initiated a crackdown on Greek life several months after King’s death, though it said the changes had been in the works before that.