

Michigan Auto Law Scholarship Essay - Claude Harrington

“There’ll never be a n***** in SAE” sung to the eerily ironic tune of “If You’re Happy and You Know It” was incessantly playing in my head as I woke up. The video of members of the University of Oklahoma SAE chapter singing that song on the bus had gone viral the night before. I was on vacation, but I knew I had a lot of work to do.

Going to school in St. Louis when Mike Brown was killed and Darren Wilson was released without a trial was an extremely tense time. Being black, you were expected to join the many protests. However, I’ve never seen protesting as my weapon for implementing change. My strength has been in infiltrating organizations and writing. As lead blogger for a section I created called “Chasing Justice” in the Washington University Political Review, I wrote an article about the fatal police shooting of Kajieme Powell, an unarmed mentally challenged young man. I researched current police training methods that might have caused this tragedy and offered possible amendments. I wrote another article entitled, “Crossing the Street,” asking readers to always consider the other side of the argument, no matter how flawed it might appear.

This time, I couldn’t just write. I had joined SAE a year after the infamous “Bear’s Den Incident.” This pledge event was a scavenger hunt where pledges were to repeat a rap song, slam poetry style in a public place. One pledge included the “n-word” as the lyrics prescribed. Although not intentional, his performance in the dining hall was close enough for a large table of black students to hear. After calls for the student’s expulsion and the chapter’s removal, SAE was put on probation until the year I joined.

This begs the question why I’d join knowing all of this. I was deeply impressed with their ownership of this mistake, their total commitment to moving past the incident, and becoming better as a result. I believe in entering spaces lacking diversity and creating

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cultural change, hoping to make it better than it was before. I knew I'd helped SAE restore its image through different philanthropy events I led, but I'd only gotten one black student to join. Recruiting blacks was no easy feat since we were still known as racists to many in the black community and this Oklahoma bombshell didn't help.

How do you convince others you are not racist? I believe you admit you haven't done the best job you could have. You demand you'll do better. And most importantly, you seek to understand, even if that makes you incredibly uncomfortable. So, I proposed our chapter hold a forum to figure out how we could be part of the solution.

Our SAE President, the pledge who actually said the n-word, was originally against the idea. Although I was upset, I didn't quite understand what I was asking of him. Many of his campus peers had called for his expulsion. Yet, after I convinced him that this was necessary, he turned out to be the biggest advocate.

The idea failed in our SAE executive session, but I presented it before the entire chapter and gained approval. We originally had many student groups participating, but then, one-by-one, they each notified us that they were no longer interested. Their advisor, a school administrator, told them to avoid working with us.

She questioned our fraternity's intentions, thinking that it was a publicity stunt. When I told her it was my idea, she suggested my DNA was improperly transcribed and I was unfit to lead such a cause as someone whom she perceived as wanting little to do with the blacks on campus. Sadly, I was unable to dissuade her and the plan failed.

Although I was unsuccessful in bringing together diverse groups at my school, I recognize the key to making any substantial change occurs through understanding. It's never easy, but it's required if true justice is ever to be realized.