

Family of teen who died at Penn State frat to file wrongful death lawsuit

By Craig Turpin

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The family of the New Jersey teen who died after a fall at a Penn State fraternity house plan to file a wrongful death lawsuit, their attorney said Monday on ABC's Good Morning America.

Timothy Piazza, 19, who grew up in Hunterdon County and lived in Readington Township, died on Feb. 4 after falling face-first down a set of basement stairs on Feb. 2 at the Penn State fraternity house where he was pledging. A grand jury investigation revealed he was one of 14 taking part in a hazing involving excessive drinking. It was nearly 12 hours before anyone called 9-1-1 on Feb. 3, and there was evidence of a cover up.

"This was occurring right underneath the noses of Penn State officials," Philadelphia-based attorney Tom Kline, who represents the Piazza family, said. "There was a task force that was empaneled a few years earlier that did nothing to stop this.

"The problem was widespread. The problem was endemic at Penn State. They looked away."

The Beta Theta Pi fraternity and 18 of its members are facing a number of charges, including involuntary manslaughter, aggravated assault, hazing and serving alcohol to minors. The members were arraigned last week and face preliminary hearings this week. Penn State has also put a graduation hold on the students.

Kline said defendants in the lawsuit could include the fraternity, its members and Penn State. Particularly troubling, those involved in the investigation have said, is the 12 hours between when Piazza fell and 9-1-1 was called.

Surveillance video inside the fraternity house captured those 12 hours as Piazza, intoxicated and seriously injured, was held down on a couch, then left alone, falling several more times. In the early-morning hours of Feb. 3 several students walk over him while he was lying on the floor.

"I don't know where their conscience was. Where the voice in the back of their head was saying 'He's hurt, I've got to do the right thing,'" Evelyn Piazza, Timothy's mother, told Good Morning America. "I don't understand how they could be so heartless and inhumane."

The Piazza family also appeared in an interview shown Monday on NBC's Today show. James Piazza, Timothy's father, said during the Today show interview, "They basically treated our son as roadkill and a rag doll."

They also appeared on CBS on Monday morning, joined by Timothy's girlfriend, Kaitlyn Tempalsky. "How do you pour liquid on someone, slap them in the face and hit them after you just watched them fall and they were unconscious?" Tempalsky asked during an interview.

Attorneys representing some of the fraternity members have said the students should not be held accountable because they could not have known the difference between a person who was intoxicated and a person with serious injuries.

"I think the individuals involved clearly bear the most responsibility," James Piazza said on Good Morning America. "If you read the timeline of what happened, they set out to feed these guys lethal amounts of alcohol from the outset. There was intent right from the beginning.

"They intended to bring these gentlemen to alcohol poisoning levels right from the outset. At the end of the day, this was planning and orchestrated, and they all need to be held accountable."

James Piazza said Penn State needs to put in policies and procedures to regulate alcohol at fraternities. He said they are willing to work with the university, and he has reached out to its leaders.

"First of all we need a statement to be made with these criminal proceedings," James Piazza said. "Secondly, we need Penn State to step up. They are one of the largest organizations in the country. They need to make significant changes. The rest of the country is watching."

Penn State President Eric J. Barron has said the university will continue to address having and excessive use of alcohol.

"The details alleged in these findings are heart-wrenching and incomprehensible," Barron has said, adding the details outlined in the grand jury report are "sickening and difficult to understand."

Barron has spoken about the difficulty in changing the culture, noting the university has no control over the houses or property. Even the governing of fraternities, he said, is overseen by national organizations. He noted the issues Penn State are facing are found at colleges and universities across the nation.

"If, behind closed doors, a group of people are willing to band together, keep something secret, not tell anyone, how is it universities can manage to deal with it?" Barron asked during a recent Today show appearance. He said the "only real tool we have in the tool box is to take away recognition of a house."

James Piazza, during his appearance on Good Morning America, pointed out: "They should not be hazing at all. It's a crime. Providing alcohol to minors is a crime. They've turned a blind eye to it, but that time is over."

Barron said the creation of a task force looking into Greek life that he headed, a Penn State Sexual Violence Prevention Roundtable and Penn State Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey are ways the university has tried to address hazing and excessive drinking.

Centre County District Attorney Stacy Parks Miller said a grand jury's ongoing investigation into Timothy Piazza's death will result in recommendations that will be delivered to the university.