

**The Legacy of Muffin:  
How Craig Howitt Rewrote the Story of Zeta Psi at Worcester Polytechnic Institute**

**Geoffrey R. McElroy (ΠΤ '01)**

A personal and historical reflection on the influence of brother Craig “Muffin” Howitt (ΠΤ '98) on the growth and development of the Pi Tau Chapter at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) during the critical years of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Special attention is paid to Br. Howitt’s influence on the recruitment process, brotherhood development efforts, ritual practice, and elder giving efforts at the Pi Tau Chapter. The history is composed by Br. Geoffrey McElroy (ΠΤ '01), Br. Howitt’s little brother in the Pi Tau Chapter.

Zeta Psi Fraternity

## **The Legacy of Muffin**

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By: Geoffrey R. McElroy, IIT 2001

The Torch of Zeta Psi

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## Prologue

Brother Craig “Muffin” Howitt<sup>1</sup> had a greater influence on the Pi Tau chapter of Zeta Psi at WPI (Worcester Polytechnic Institute) than did any other person since its founding in 1976. Muffin was a leader of the WPI rugby club and the first WPI wrestler to join Zeta Psi; as a direct result of Muffin's recruiting efforts, Pi Tau eventually became both the *rugby house* and *wrestling house* on campus, giving the chapter a lasting edge for recruiting the top freshmen candidates at WPI. Muffin's legacy includes the founding of the Pi Tau *Giving Circle* (which later merged into *Zete4Life*); Pi Tau now leads all other Zeta Psi chapters in *Zete4Life* contributions. Prior to Muffin's initiation, Pi Tau had never won a single Zeta Psi outstanding chapter award; Muffin's freshman year (1995) began a streak of 12 straight – including a Gregory E. McElroy Order of Excellence in 2001. He also presided over 4 Gold Escutcheon awards during his active years (1995-2001) and was quite literally the “driving” force behind Pi Tau being awarded the William A. Comstock Trophy three times<sup>2</sup> – 1996, 1997, and in 2000, when he served as the first IHQ<sup>3</sup> leadership consultant from the Pi Tau chapter. But more than anything, the mark that Muffin left on Pi Tau was his infectious personality, which was reflected in every brother he recruited and was passed down to their subsequent recruits – an outbreak of enthusiasm for the fun and adventure that could only accompany true brotherhood. The affection and camaraderie he garnered and shared with his brothers served as the basis for how he led the transformation of Pi Tau from an afterthought to one of the best and most sustainable chapters in Zeta Psi.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig James Howitt, initiated brother ΘΦ of the ΠΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Reference: <<http://www.pitau.org/index.php?id=19>>

<sup>3</sup> “IHQ” is a term for the International Headquarters of Zeta Psi, based at 15 South Henry St., Pearl River, NY.

### **“Follow Me to Adventure”**

“Muffin” (often “Muff” for short) was not Craig’s first nickname – he was once called “Bubba” by his high school friends while growing up in Windham, Maine. It wasn’t until he moved to Florida after college and got a *real job* that people started using his given name – though even now he’s often “Big Craig”<sup>4</sup>. Some guys would shy away from a nickname like “Muffin” (which one could argue is not very masculine), but Craig welcomed it; he likely considered it a mark placed on him by his friends, and thus a badge of honor. Knowing Craig, you’d have expected some outlandish story behind the nickname’s origin (unlike the movie *National Lampoon’s Animal House*<sup>5</sup>, not every member of the chapter was given a nickname), but the story was actually quite simple and innocent. As a freshman, he once brought some muffins with him to a rugby game to share with his teammates...someone called him “Muffin” and the name stuck – both within and outside Zeta Psi. That unusual name was likely one of the traits that made him rather infamous back then.

As a heavyweight wrestler and rugger for Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Muffin was well known throughout campus as being a rather larger-than-life figure...both in personality and in stature. Anyone who had seen Muffin in a wrestling singlet can attest to his abundance of body hair, which, when coupled with his size and fierceness on both the wrestling mat and the rugby pitch, could give one the impression of a savage beast; but those who knew him saw him more as a big teddy bear. Despite his appearance, he was one of the friendliest, most outgoing guys you could encounter on a college campus.

One could easily remember Muffin bounding through one of many social gatherings on campus wearing a shabby old t-shirt displaying the words “Follow Me to Adventure” across his

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<sup>4</sup> Reference: <<http://erauglobe.com/2014/06/employee-spotlight-craig-howitt/>>

<sup>5</sup> *National Lampoon’s Animal House*, 1978, Universal Pictures

massive shoulders and back. And dammit, people did. At well over 6 feet, the message would read like a floating party banner above the crowds. It was known to be an open invitation to join him for what was undoubtedly going to be an unpredictably good time. Muffin was a kind of social genius. He had a knack for effortlessly livening up parties by gathering crowds of people and organizing games they wouldn't even expect to enjoy, but always did. And when the event was simply not up to par – the crowds would follow him to one that was. He had an unusual leadership style and raw, fun personality that drew people to him. This, in addition to his absolute love of Zeta Psi, was the core of what made him such a great recruiter.

In his years at Pi Tau, Muffin carefully – and rather stealthily – managed to mold the brotherhood into a model Zeta organization, using his own image as the template. He hand-picked those freshmen he knew would fit with his vision for the house and then rushed the hell out of them – a snare they could not help but get caught in. And they were not sorry. As pledges, Muffin taught them what it was to be a Zeta – or, at least, what being a Zeta was to him – and he compelled them to love and appreciate it the way he does. One traditional Pi Tau pledging lesson could serve as a great illustration for Muffin's perceived notion on being a Zeta...

One night during pledging, the pledges are gathered together in a room and asked to watch two movies: *National Lampoon's Animal House*<sup>6</sup> and *Dead Poets Society*<sup>7</sup>. *Animal House* of course portrays an objectionable, yet stereotypical side of fraternity – an atmosphere of excitement and mischief, with no control or respect for one another or for the university; it ends with the chapter shut down and the brothers expelled from school. *Dead Poets Society* portrays a more ritualistic side of fraternity, highlighting the joys and camaraderie of a secret brotherhood,

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<sup>6</sup> *National Lampoon's Animal House*, 1978, Universal Pictures

<sup>7</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, 1989, Touchstone Pictures

but (though some might disagree with this interpretation) it shows how things can go wrong when it's taken too seriously – it culminates with a member's suicide and a teacher losing his job. The objective of this activity is to demonstrate the two extremes of what a fraternal organization can be, and to teach the pledges to strive for a happy medium. Muffin's philosophy on being a Zeta seemed to echo this lesson – find the happy medium. Love the ritual, have fun, but don't be stupid about it...and never jeopardize the fraternity. His natural ability to drive this message home was how he succeeded in changing the house culture where others in the past had failed.

Muffin knew what he was doing that day in September 1998 when he took it upon himself to rip down a wall in the Pi Tau house basement and effectively double the size of their secret Chapter Room. Though it angered some brothers at the time, the loss of a little extra party space became much easier to justify at the end of that school year, when the space was first used for a ritual meeting with all 21 of the newly initiated brothers Muffin led the way to secure, Pi Tau's largest pledge class ever. That meeting was all the validation any of them needed.

### **An Early History of the Pi Tau Chapter**

The Pi Tau chapter was founded on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1976, so it had accumulated nearly 20 years of history – and over 200 brothers – prior to Muffin's arrival. An IHQ staff led by then-executive director Gregory McElroy<sup>8</sup> initiated the 25 charter members<sup>9</sup> – including founders Doug Elliot<sup>10</sup> (the son of Zeta Psi great Henry Elliot<sup>11</sup>), Gary Loeb<sup>12</sup>, and Jack Watters<sup>13</sup> – and

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory E. McElroy, Θ chapter of ZΨ, graduated 1970; Executive Director 1972-1996; Phi Alpha, 2006–2008.

<sup>9</sup> Reference: “Zeta Psi Fraternity of North America, Double-Diamond Jubilee”, Turner Publishing Company, June 15 1997, Page 70, Section: “Pi Tau (ΠΤ) 1976, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA”.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Douglas Dodge Elliot, initiated brother A [Alpha] of the ΠΤ chapter of ZΨ, graduated 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Henry M. Elliot, Jr., Η [Eta] chapter of ZΨ, graduated 1945; Phi Alpha, 1969–1970.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Adels Loeb, initiated brother Β [Beta] of the ΠΤ chapter of ZΨ, graduated 1977.

<sup>13</sup> John Jack Albert Watters, Jr., initiated brother Γ of the ΠΤ chapter of ZΨ, class of 1977.

facilitated the immediate purchase of a chapter house at 32 Dean Street in Worcester, a prime location on the greater WPI campus. After almost 40 years [and a few hundred thousand dollars' worth of maintenance], that house still stands as the residence of Zeta Psi's Pi Tau chapter.

Pi Tau had a mixed history throughout its first two decades. By most accounts, it started out strong in the late 1970s, dipped in the middle to late 1980's, and then rebounded in the early 1990's.

The seventies might have been considered a time of experimentation at Pi Tau – a house looking for an identity. One example was the chapter's decision to include women, considered “little sisters” (*not Zetes, mind you*), on the house composites – a short-lived but notable quirk. The founding brothers immediately established a strong sense of fellowship, centered around their new chapter house, that lasted well into the early eighties – a sense that still remains highly visible among those brothers (and even “sisters”) that continue to visit the house and participate in alumni activities. One leader from that era, Mike Sharon<sup>14</sup>, could be considered a forerunner to Muffin; with similar personality traits that also made him a joy to be around (and infamous on campus), he was able to use his social skills to recruit and to rally brothers around Zeta Psi.<sup>15</sup> His leadership endures to this day, as he still attends Pi Tau's annual Founder's Day celebration every year, dragging as many brothers from the '70s and '80s with him as he can muster.

As successful as they were back then, however, the earliest band of Pi Tau brothers never established an identity on campus that would set themselves apart from the other fraternities. They were not associated with any particular sport or other extracurricular activity at WPI (e.g. – ΣΦΕ was the *football house*, ΦΚΘ was the *wrestling house*, etc.). One might have considered

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Andrew Sharon, initiated brother AO [Alpha Omicron] of the IIT chapter of ZΨ, class of 1980.

<sup>15</sup> Interview: James Boal Hiller, 18 April 2015

the Zeta house identity at the time to be one of your stereotypical WPI engineer. While many might wear this label as a badge of honor, it was likely this distinction – or lack thereof – that eventually led to a steady decrease in new initiates throughout the 1980s.

In the late eighties, active membership in Pi Tau dropped to its lowest point (into the teens) and the Zeta Psi house began to develop a rather unsavory reputation on campus – as troublemakers. Amongst other black marks, it had to endure a raid by the Worcester police department that saw the arrest of a brother named Bradley Epranian<sup>16</sup> for drug offenses. It goes without saying that they were not even in the conversation for any WPI or Zeta Psi awards during that time – as they did nothing to deserve one. By many accounts, the house had lost its way.

Fortunately, a group of brothers (and even non-brothers) recognized what was taking place and took a stand, with efforts that resulted in a substantial rebound for the chapter in the early-nineties. Most history books give the lion's share of credit for Pi Tau's turnaround to a man named Alan Okun<sup>17</sup> – and deservedly so. Alan was not a Zeta, yet his desire to serve the community and be a mentor to men like himself drove him to volunteer as the Pi Tau chapter house adviser from 1991 up until his untimely death (in his forties<sup>18</sup>) on Dec. 31<sup>st</sup> 1996. In 1992, Pi Tau earned its first official Zeta Psi Fraternity recognition of achievement in years – a Most Improved Chapter award<sup>19</sup>. This came in addition to a WPI Dean's Award given to the Pi Tau chapter that year to recognize them as the most improved fraternity on campus. Alan earned honors from both IHQ<sup>20</sup> and WPI<sup>21</sup> for the dedication, leadership, and inspirational teachings he

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<sup>16</sup> Bradley Gray Epranian resigned from Zeta Psi on November 7, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Okun, the owner of two local radio stations in Worcester (WGFP 940 AM & WXXW 98.9 FM), served as the Pi Tau chapter house adviser from 1991-1996. He was a member of the ΦΔΘ fraternity, so he could not join ZΨ.

<sup>18</sup> Reference: Fybush, Scott D., "New England RadioWatch", January 8 1997, <<http://www.bostonradio.org/nerw/nerw-970108.html>>, and July 24 1997, <<http://www.bostonradio.org/nerw/nerw-970724.html>>

<sup>19</sup> Reference: <<http://www.pitau.org/index.php?id=19>>

<sup>20</sup> Alan was presented with a George H. McLaughlin Interfraternity Service Award at the 1993 ZΨ Convention.



imparted on Zeta Psi over that period of time<sup>22</sup>. But despite his exemplary work, Alan was only a guide; it was the brothers who heeded Alan's words that made Pi Tau what it eventually became – a perennial Zeta Psi “Outstanding Chapter” award winner. The Zeta Psi history books may never give enough credit [if any at all] to names like Evan Pressman<sup>23</sup>, Fred Parmenter<sup>24</sup>, Spirit Joseph<sup>25</sup>, Jim Pavlat<sup>26</sup>, Mike Fyrberg<sup>27</sup>, and [of course] Craig Howitt for the resurgence of the chapter in the 1990s, but it is important for these brothers to be recognized here [at least] for their contributions.

### **The Rugby House**

It's no coincidence that Pi Tau's largest period of growth – during the 1990s – came during a time when its brothers first began to develop an identity on campus apart from that of [at best] a stereotypical engineer or [at worst] a group of miscreants. It happened when brothers began joining and then becoming leaders on the WPI rugby club.

It was likely the growing Zeta Psi presence on the rugby team that drew Muffin to the fraternity. Even though Muffin was also a wrestler, rugby was the first sport he'd play in the school year – his first opportunity to make friends, his first opportunity to be *rushed*. Rugby is a brotherhood all its own. In no other sport are you as physically close (literally locked in) with all the other players on the field as you are when playing rugby. One could relate it to a 30-man WrestleMania – but with a little more organization. In his normal position, prop, Muffin not

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<sup>21</sup> WPI's fraternity advisor award was named the “Alan Okun Memorial Award for Excellence in Chapter Advising”.

<sup>22</sup> Reference: “Zeta Psi Fraternity of North America, Double-Diamond Jubilee”, Turner Publishing Company, June 15 1997, Page 70, Section: “Pi Tau (ΠΤ) 1976, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA”

<sup>23</sup> Evan Scott Pressman, initiated brother BO [Beta Omega] of the ΠΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 1984.

<sup>24</sup> Fredrick Nyle Parmenter, Jr., initiated brother ΖΝ [Zeta Nu] of the ΠΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Spirit Joseph, initiated brother ΖΟ [Zeta Omega] of the ΠΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 1995.

<sup>26</sup> James Andrew Pavlat, initiated brother ΘΓ of the ΠΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Peter Fyrberg, initiated brother ΘΙ of the ΠΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 1997.

only locks in with his own teammates during a scrum, but he also locks in with members of the opposing team. This type of closeness forces one to develop a certain respect and trust for not only one's direct teammates, but also for players from the other school – everyone feels like they're in it together. When the game is over – win or lose – and everyone is bloodied and bruised, the players will all share a strong feeling of camaraderie and joint accomplishment...not unlike a fraternal bond.

An aspect of rugby that makes it different from most other college sports is a common practice where, following the game, the home team will host a party (often referred to as a “drink-up”) and invite the visiting squad to join them. It would include a slew of games, crude singing, and some tame rookie initiation rites, but would always be a great time. Regardless of whether the opposition joined, the WPI team would always host one of these parties – and Muffin would not miss it. The parties were held at one specific off-campus house<sup>28</sup>, generally unaffiliated with fraternities, that a group of ruggers had been renting out for some time before Muffin's arrival at school. One aspect of this house that made it ideal for rugby parties was that it had a large, open living room (with a bar in it), two side-by-side bathrooms on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor (just at the top of the stairs), and it was located on a commercial road with plenty of parking across the street at the supermarket. Another was its non-affiliation with fraternities, as freshmen were not allowed inside fraternity houses until the beginning of rush (Oct.-Nov.). Aside from the obvious draws, Muffin recognized very quickly the untapped recruitment opportunities offered by rugby (including this “Rugby House”, as it was dubbed), and sought to make the sport synonymous with Zeta Psi at WPI.

Rugby is not normally a sport that kids will play in high school, so new students generally needed an introduction to it – and Muffin was always willing to provide one. As

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<sup>28</sup> The WPI “Rugby House” was located at 222 Park Ave., Worcester, MA.

Muffin rose up through the ranks to become a leader on the rugby team, he soon became the unofficial recruiter-in-chief for new ruggers – a position that was not without ulterior opportunities<sup>29</sup>. When recruiting men to the rugby team, he would always have an eye toward eventual recruitment into Zeta. One great thing about the rugby season was that it afforded Muffin and the other Zetes time to evaluate all the new rugby recruits prior to the official fraternity rush period; if they fit in, the brothers would work to befriend them...and then pulling them into Zeta Psi was easy.

In 1997, Muffin made the decision to move out of the Zeta Psi chapter house and into the off-campus “Rugby House”. It was a short matter of time before the residents of the “Rugby House” were predominately all Zetes (who also happen to play rugby), effectively making it an unofficial second Zeta Psi house at WPI...and one of the best recruiting tools possible. It was at this point that Zeta Psi had finally attained its distinctive identity – as the *rugby house* on campus.

### **The Wrestling House**

In addition to his passion for rugby, Muffin was also an avid wrestler. Adding to his legacy, Muffin, a heavyweight, became the first WPI wrestler to join Pi Tau. The collegiate heavyweight classification ranged from 190 to 275 lbs., so it’s hard to say exactly how much Muffin weighed at the time, but one could reasonably estimate that he was above the median.

In those days, the wrestling team was dominated by members of the Phi Kappa Theta (“Kap”) fraternity – it was considered the *wrestling house* on campus. Much to the chagrin of the Kaps, of course, Muffin made the decision to join Zeta Psi. While he respected the Kaps and

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<sup>29</sup> *Fun Fact:* Muffin was the founder of the WPI women’s rugby team; he led the effort to recruit women to fill the team’s roster and then stood in front of the student government to demand funding (which he got). He was also the team’s first head coach.

their claim to the team, Muffin quietly worked to maintain a Zeta Psi presence among the ranks (even if only one or two brothers)...beginning with Justin Ripley<sup>30</sup>, who incidentally was also a rugger. A freshman when Muffin was a junior, Justin (who became Muffin's "little" brother) was also a heavyweight for most of his career. And although *he* would have been *under* the median weight, Justin would become Muffin's normal partner during team practices – and he would occasionally be chosen over Muffin for the starting job.<sup>31</sup> Despite Muffin's natural feeling of disappointment in these circumstances, however, it would clearly be accompanied by pride in his little brother – that's just who he was.

That same year, Muffin used his wrestling acumen to recruit Geoff McElroy<sup>32</sup>, son of past executive director Greg McElroy, to the Pi Tau chapter – out of high school. Granted, Geoff would have joined Zeta Psi wherever he went to school, but it was Muffin that convinced him during a college visit (complete with a tour of the wrestling facilities) to attend WPI and join his Division III team. Geoff, who also became Muffin's little brother, eventually joined the rugby team as well – per Muffin's suggestion, of course.

The small Zeta Psi presence on the WPI wrestling team endured well after Muffin's years of eligibility ran out – with more brothers such as Justin Lutz<sup>33</sup> and Greg Matthews<sup>34</sup> on the squad – and it eventually led to the first Zete being named a wrestling team captain, Tejal Patel<sup>35</sup>, in the 2002-2003 season<sup>36</sup>. It was this small presence, initiated by Muffin, that eventually led to a coup. The Phi Kappa Theta fraternity's WPI alumni board decided to shut

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<sup>30</sup> Justin Joseph Ripley, initiated brother KI [Kappa Iota] of the IIT chapter of ZΨ fraternity, graduated 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Interview: Justin Joseph Ripley, April 17 2015

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Robert McElroy, initiated brother ΛΓ of the IIT chapter of ZΨ fraternity, graduated 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Justin Edwin Lutz, initiated brother ΛΞ of the IIT chapter of ZΨ fraternity, graduated 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory Jay Matthews, initiated brother NM [Nu Mu] of the IIT chapter of ZΨ fraternity, graduated 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Tejal Kirit Patel, initiated brother MM [Mu Mu] of the IIT chapter of ZΨ fraternity, graduated 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Reference: <[http://static.psb.in.com/k/c/icbx5g29lqw72k/WPI\\_Wrestling\\_Year\\_By\\_Year\\_History.pdf](http://static.psb.in.com/k/c/icbx5g29lqw72k/WPI_Wrestling_Year_By_Year_History.pdf)>

down their chapter for disciplinary reasons in 2004<sup>37</sup>, ending their ability to recruit new members. It later reopened in 2006 (with all new active brothers), but the damage was done. In those two years, the Zetas on the wrestling team seized the opportunity to recruit a large contingent of new wrestlers to Zeta Psi, effectively making them the *wrestling house* on campus.

As both the *wrestling house* and *rugby house* (identifiers that remain to this day), Zeta Psi's Pi Tau chapter had earned two separate distinctions on the WPI campus that will all but ensure their ability to recruit the top men on campus for years to come.

### **The Vision of Bill Comstock**

Alan Okun should be credited with the rekindling of Pi Tau's relationship with Zeta Psi's International Headquarters in the 1990's, acting as a conduit between the chapter and IHQ. During his time as the Pi Tau chapter advisor, Alan regularly served as a staff member for the Northeast Regional LTI<sup>38</sup>, and, despite not being a brother, he even ran a number of LTI courses while attending Zeta Psi's international conventions<sup>39</sup>. When he died on New Years' Eve in 1996, one could easily argue that his Torch was passed on to Muffin.

In his junior year at that time, Muffin was just finishing his tenure as the Sigma Rho at Pi Tau – a post that would immediately pass on to two of this little brothers in succession, Chris Gates<sup>40</sup> and then Justin Ripley. As Sigma Rho, Muffin truly took to heart the teachings of William A. Comstock<sup>41</sup>. All Zeta Psi pledges learn about Comstock's vision of strength via the unity of all chapters of Zeta Psi – Muffin chose to live that vision. Whatever beat up, old car

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<sup>37</sup> Reference: <wpi.wikia.com/wiki/Phi\_Kappa\_Theta>

<sup>38</sup> "LTI" stands for "Leadership Training Institute", an IHQ program for teaching leadership skills to Active brothers.

<sup>39</sup> Reference: "Zeta Psi Fraternity of North America, Double-Diamond Jubilee", Turner Publishing Company, June 15 1997, Page 70, Section: "Pi Tau (PiT) 1976, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA"

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Raymond Gates, initiated brother IA of the PiT chapter of ZPsi fraternity, class of 1999.

<sup>41</sup> William A. Comstock, Ξ chapter of ZPsi, graduated 1899; founder of Zeta Psi's "The Circle" periodical.

Muffin happened to be driving at any given time throughout his college career, he was constantly compelled to drive it hundreds and thousands of miles to visit the other chapters of Zeta Psi whenever he could – and it would always be filled to capacity with his fellow Pi Taus. It was through his “drive” that Pi Tau earned the coveted Comstock Trophy at the 1996 Zeta Psi convention in Lincoln, NE...and then its second in successive years at Zeta Psi’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary convention in New York City, 1997<sup>42</sup>. And it was a result of Muffin’s efforts in these years that a new Pi Tau house position was created – the Comstock Chair, for which the duties include planning chapter road trips and other activities to advance the vision of Bill Comstock.

Just after becoming the unofficial conduit to IHQ in early 1997, Muffin’s first big act was the recruitment to Pi Tau of his eventual replacement for this post, Geoff McElroy. Muffin had already established a relationship with Geoff’s father, Greg, who had recently moved on from his role as executive director earlier that year (after 24 years). It was that relationship that gave Greg the upmost confidence that his only son would be in good hands within the Pi Tau chapter. One could say that through this recruiting effort, Muffin ensured Pi Tau would gain a *lifelong* conduit to IHQ in Geoff, who proudly continues to hold that Torch while serving as the current Treasurer of the Pi Tau Elders Association, the group that owns and maintains the chapter house, and a member of the Grand Chapter’s Ritual Committee.

Later, to further his work advancing the vision of Bill Comstock, Muffin became the first Pi Tau brother ever to work for IHQ, serving as a leadership consultant in 1999 – the modern day equivalent to the “traveling secretary” post first introduced by Comstock. It was in that post that Muffin truly cemented his legacy.

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<sup>42</sup> Reference: <<http://www.pitau.org/index.php?id=19>>

Despite being the consultant for many chapters during his year at IHQ, Muffin made sure to maintain a living presence at the Pi Tau chapter house...so much so that he was even kept on the Pi Tau composite as the chapter's "Leadership Consultant" position. It was through his leadership and example that the Pi Tau chapter regained the Comstock Trophy at the convention of 2000 in San Antonio, along with its second-in-a-row Most Outstanding Chapter award and second-in-a-row Gold Escutcheon award – a Trifecta the Pi Taus proudly dubbed "The Triple Crown". It was in the following year, when Muffin returned to Worcester, that Pi Tau was presented with its third-in-a-row Most Outstanding Chapter honor, and thus its first Order of Excellence award, at the 2001 convention in Washington DC<sup>43</sup>. That year it was Justin Ripley, Muffin's little brother, that followed in his footsteps to serve as the IHQ leadership consultant. Justin was one of at least four other Pi Taus that would later work for IHQ, including two more leadership consultants, Anthony Richardson<sup>44</sup> and Eric Landry<sup>45</sup>. Bill Comstock would have been proud.

### **The Torch**

If you asked Muffin what it is he loves most about Zeta Psi – aside from his brothers – he would tell you, in no uncertain terms, that it's the ritual. The moment he was initiated, he became infatuated with the many layers of symbolism within Zeta Psi, known only to those worthy enough to enter into her halls. His passion for learning and teaching the ritual of Zeta Psi drove him to become Sigma Rho in his sophomore year. His greatest motivation to seek this post came when he learned about Zeta Psi's Gold Escutcheon Award, which is given to the chapter with the most brothers scoring a Gold Escutcheon on the ritual exam, and when he

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<sup>43</sup> Reference: <<http://www.pitau.org/index.php?id=19>>

<sup>44</sup> Anthony Michael Richardson, initiated brother ΠΙΙ of the ΠΙΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Eric Robert Landry, initiated brother ΠΙΟ of the ΠΙΤ chapter of ΖΨ fraternity, graduated 2010.

discovered – with shock – that the winning chapters of the past few years each had only a handful of brothers that earned it. In his mind, this indicated that the majority of brothers in Zeta Psi did not hold the basic knowledge that he believed set them apart from the rest of mankind...and he was compelled to do something about it.

Muffin first took the ritual exam less than a month after his initiation while visiting the Theta chapter at the University of Connecticut for an LTI – probably before he was truly ready – but he scored high enough to earn a Silver Escutcheon (which was still an option back then). He was glad of the minor recognition, but vowed to study harder and longer before his next opportunity to take the test. The following year, when he was Sigma Rho, he did of course earn his Gold Escutcheon – but by that point, just passing was not enough for him. He had heard that only one brother had ever earned a perfect score of 300 on the exam in its history, and he wanted to be the next. He ended up taking it two more times, but gave up after achieving a 299.5 – with a half point lost for a punctuation error! Despite his frustration, he decided that was close enough...he had proven he knew it all by heart.<sup>46</sup>

But his true mission as Sigma Rho was not to pass the test himself, which he always knew he would do – it was to influence all the other Pi Taus to pass it too. Muffin believed that learning the ritual was not just another accolade, it was a duty. He understood that the ritual of Zeta Psi was the Torch that each one of them must hold and pass on to their successors, and he was determined to ensure that all Pi Tau brothers understood this principle as he did.

Desiring a creative way to communicate this lesson to new members, Muffin drew up an elaborate new pledging lesson called “The Dream” that has since become a tradition for every Pi Tau initiation week<sup>47</sup>. Every pledge can tell you how this lesson is the haziest, and yet somehow

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<sup>46</sup> Interview: Craig James Howitt, April 20 2015

<sup>47</sup> Interview: Justin Joseph Ripley, April 17 2015



the most unforgettable, moment of the pledge period. It takes place as the pledge is awoken in the middle of the night and, while blindfolded, told of the importance of ritual in Zeta Psi. Without giving away too many details, “The Dream” features a moment where the pledge is forced to drop a torch they are holding...and then taught the repercussions for doing so<sup>48</sup>. It’s a very powerful lesson for which one could not avoid learning the moral.

To teach the ritual, Muffin implemented a program at Pi Tau that he called the “Sigma Rho Workshops”, and made attendance mandatory for all newly initiated brothers (NIBs). During the workshops, which were held weekly on the same night previously used for pledge meetings, Muffin had all the NIBs [and many other brothers] gather at the house so he could teach them the secrets of Zeta Psi and then help them to study everything they needed to know to pass the Gold Escutcheon exam. These lessons became a tradition that would see Pi Tau win Zeta Psi’s Gold Escutcheon Award in 9 out of the next 10 years.<sup>49</sup>

But he would not stop there...while serving as the IHQ leadership consultant, Muffin made it a point during every chapter visit to hail the importance of ritual. And he was always eager to hold one of his signature “Sigma Rho Workshops” when visiting any chapter that wanted one.<sup>50</sup> In his words: “The ritual is the one thing that binds all of the chapters of Zeta Psi. A tradition over 150 years old, with symbolism and meaning that is much, much older than that!”<sup>51</sup> And his message was heard. He could not be happier to see the renewed emphasis placed on ritual by the Grand Chapter in 2013, when it unveiled a new program to teach the history and ritual of Zeta Psi – aptly named The Torch.

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<sup>48</sup> As with all Pi Tau pledging lessons, “The Dream” does not include any acts that may be considered hazing, a practice the Pi Taus strictly forbid of its members.

<sup>49</sup> Reference: <<http://www.pitau.org/index.php?id=19>>

<sup>50</sup> Interview: Craig James Howitt, April 20 2015

<sup>51</sup> Quote by Craig James Howitt, April 20 2015.

## The Giving Circle

Throughout their college careers, it was quite apparent to all Pi Tau Zetas that theirs was the smallest fraternity house on campus, in terms of physical size; some bemoaned this fact, others embraced it. Regardless, the big drive for Pi Tau in the late nineties was to move to a larger chapter house. The brotherhood acknowledged that in order to do so, they would need money – money they did not have. Muffin believed in this project and took it upon himself to take the reins. He immediately sought help from Greg McElroy, who is a professional fundraiser by trade; while Greg’s company could not viably take on such a “small” project, he did offer Muffin a great deal of advice on how to run a capital donation campaign.

Muffin heeded Greg’s advice – and worked his butt off. He personally called the entire Pi Tau alumni directory and sent out fundraising packets he created to any address on file. But he simply could not overcome the biggest hurdle: the Pi Tau chapter was too young. The typical capital campaign for a fraternity house depends on a number of large individual donations, and he was unable to locate any Elders from the past 25 years that had the means to donate such a significant sum. A new house was simply not in the cards any time soon. Regardless, the campaign ended up being a highly critical endeavor for Pi Tau, as, during the course of the campaign, Muffin (with the help of other dedicated Elders<sup>52</sup>) founded the Pi Tau *Giving Circle*.

The *Giving Circle* is an automatic debit program that was originally established by the elders of the Phi Epsilon chapter at the University of Maryland for brothers who wished to donate to the chapter on a monthly basis. During his time as the IHQ leadership consultant, Muffin learned of the program and thought it was perfect for Pi Tau, which was founded the same year as Phi Epsilon (1976), and thus faced similar donor challenges. He made contact with

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<sup>52</sup> Giving Circle founders included Pi Tau brothers Jim Pavlat & Justin Ripley.

the administrator of Phi Epsilon's *Giving Circle*, Brother Stuart Bowers<sup>53</sup>, who agreed to run Pi Tau's *Giving Circle* as well. From its inception in 2000 through 2012 (when it was merged into the Grand Chapter's *Zete4Life* program), the Pi Tau *Giving Circle* accumulated over \$70,000 in donations from Pi Tau brothers. Since the merge with *Zete4Life*, Pi Tau has netted over \$10,000 more – a total exceeding \$80,000.

The Pi Tau Elders Association is run almost entirely on rental income from the active brothers – a monthly check that, frankly, does not always arrive. That money is used to pay for the chapter house – primarily the mortgage, property insurance, real estate taxes, water/sewer, and maintenance (ever the wildcard expense). The organization was literally living paycheck to paycheck for many years leading up to the *Giving Circle* initiative and, in retrospect, was extremely lucky to have had no major disasters occur; the lack of a "rainy day fund" could have bankrupted the organization...with the potential to force a foreclosure.

As it so happened, in 2011, the rainy day had finally come...it was determined that the chapter house kitchen had fallen into a state of disrepair – featuring rotted-out support beams beneath the floor due to years of leaky pipes – and needed a major constructive overhaul. Even if the loan the Elders eventually secured was received in time (which it wasn't), it wouldn't have been enough to complete the summer project – as the city of Worcester stepped in halfway through and made demands that turned a \$60,000 project into a \$100,000 project. Without the \$58,538 in Elder donations made available through the *Giving Circle*, the project could not have been finished before the start of the school year, leaving 13 brothers homeless – potentially for months. That critical buffer provided by Muffin's *Giving Circle* saved the chapter from what could have been a catastrophe – possibly even a deathblow.

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<sup>53</sup> Stuart Bowers, ΦE chapter of ΖΨ, graduated 1981; Current Gamma Alpha.

The *Giving Circle* program was so brilliant from one particular aspect...the brothers do not even have to think about making a donation each month (or each year, etc.); it just happens automatically. The only effort involved with the system would be to get one's name removed, should they wish to do so. Starting from Muffin's original compilation of donors, the *Giving Circle* would lose some here, gain some there, but remain a consistent source of around \$500 per month (\$6k per year) in donations for years.

Phi Epsilon's *Giving Circle* program, which was also later joined by the Iota Alpha chapter at the University of Texas, eventually became the inspiration for a new Grand Chapter donor initiative called *Zete4Life*, which follows the same model of a monthly debit system. Like Phi Epsilon and Iota Alpha, Pi Tau eventually merged its *Giving Circle* into the fraternity-wide *Zete4Life* program, such that IHQ would manage the account from that point forward and provide Pi Tau with an annual check at each year's convention. At last count, the money contributed to *Zete4Life* from Pi Tau donors is the most among all the chapters in Zeta Psi – an incredible feat that wouldn't have happened without Muffin.

## **Epilogue**

After the 2000-2001 school year, Muffin decided to move on to “the real world”. The sudden death of his mother during that year was a huge blow to him and the chapter, and it in many ways prompted a reevaluation of his life and his eventual departure from WPI – leaving the chapter in the hands of all those brothers he had influenced, and their successors. He’d still maintain a presence in the Pi Tau Elders Association for years to come, though his relocation to Florida made his visits to the house fewer and further between. Regardless, the mark he left there remains visible to anyone who knew him back then – both on the walls (or lack thereof) and in the faces of every rugger, wrestler, Sigma Rho, and Comstock Chair that passes through the house. They are all a part of Muffin’s legacy.

While he’s moved on from an active role in Pi Tau, Craig Howitt’s legacy in Zeta Psi has only just begun. After settling down in Daytona, Florida with a wife and two boys, he is now back to working with Greg McElroy on a new project – the creation of Zeta Psi’s first ever chapter in the state of Florida. He has claimed to have already recruited 5-10 men – through rugby, of course – to form a new colony at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University<sup>54</sup>, where he works as the university’s Lead Web Developer and Information Architect<sup>55</sup>. And Zeta Psi will undoubtedly continue to follow him to adventure...

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<sup>54</sup> Interview: Gregory E. McElroy, April 5 2015

<sup>55</sup> Reference: <<http://erauglobe.com/2014/06/employee-spotlight-craig-howitt/>>

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