

Is USM Becoming a Party School Under Saunders?

We are about 18 months into the Martha Saunders administration of USM and indications are that USM is poised to become known as a "party school." Those indications were given a recent boost in Valerie Wells' 31-August-08 article ("[The party starts before kickoff](#)") for *The Hattiesburg American* describing recent game-day activities on the USM campus. According to Wells, "men smoked small cigars and drank Bud Light straight from the can" while relaxing near the Aubrey K. Lucas Administration Building hours before the Golden Eagles took on Louisiana -- Lafayette in the 2008 season opener for both teams. Saunders visited with members of the group, who were next to "the Dome" to participate in the "Countdown to Kickoff" tailgating event.

Across from the AKL Administration Building, in what the USM family refers to as "the District," the afternoon partying was going strong. Wells spoke with Rob Hefley, a self-professed member of the "10-year seniors," which is a group of "perpetual students" who tailgate at every USM home game. Hefley told Wells that it is "[j]ello shots. Lots of jello shots" that make his tent the best among all of those in "the District" each home game. Hefley's enthusiasm was seconded by Alicia Westbrook, who "popped open a beer" as she spoke with Wells about her tailgating experiences on the campus. All of this activity occurred, according to Wells, within eye-shot of a sign at the entrance to campus on Memorial Drive that states: "**USM alcohol policy strictly enforced; no open consumption or possession of alcoholic beverages.**" And as if Wells' conclusion, that "no one was paying attention to the sign," needed further support, Adam Grant, a 22-year old CoB major gave it to her. While pointing towards "the District," Grant told Wells, "There's more drunk people over there than on the whole southern continent."

Some may credit all of this to game-day stuff that goes on at all college campuses. That may be so, but there is something to the Wells report that stings members of the so-called USM family. That stinging sense is articulated in one of the online responses to Wells' article. That response, written by a *THA* reader using the name "smdistrict," is inserted below:

smdistrict wrote:

This is a manufactured negative story about game day at Southern Miss. One you almost always find the day after a Southern Miss home game in the HA. These articles are formulaic and it's disappointing to see. Tailgating is a vital part of the college experience on any campus. Yesterday was an unbelievable atmosphere in spite of a Category 4 hurricane in the Gulf. Our fans have fun and are respectful and do not deserve another cheap shot from this paper.

8/31/2008 8:31:16 AM

Perhaps the underlying angst about Wells' 31-August-08 *THA* article has something to do with how the campus has changed since Saunders assumed the leadership role. Evidence of that change was reported by both *The Student Printz*, the USM student newspaper, and USMNEWS.net a few months ago. In a *Special Report* installment ([A Booze Accounting](#)), USMNEWS.net reporters presented USMPD data, data that were previously included in the *TSP* article, indicating that various liquor law violations on the USM campus had increased by 135% during Saunders' first year at the helm. Even worse, on-campus DUI citations increased by 467% during Saunders' first year, and according to one USM student, the USM administration was not making a real effort to crack down on on-campus alcohol possession. According to the student, alcohol is prevalent throughout the dormitory system at USM. The quality of this student's view is supported by what Wells observed on 30-August-08.

What has Saunders been focusing on since taking over at USM? According to some reports here at USMNEWS.net, renovating the master bedroom suite in the mansion on Jamestown Road has been a staple on Saunders' activity list. That project was budgeted by the IHL at the astounding sum of \$300,000, yet it quickly rose to over \$320,000 with the [first](#) cost overrun, and again to about \$325,000 with the [second](#). Now, with the recommendation of the IHL's research staff, a [third](#) change order is in the offing for Saunders' mansion renovation. This one will bring the cost to around \$330,000.

When she is not consumed with the details of her \$330,000 boudoir renovation, Saunders is gushing over the finer things in her luxury suite at M.M. Roberts Stadium. Like the boudoir renovation, the details of Saunders' luxury suite have not escaped the [attention](#) of USMNEWS.net, nor of *The Hattiesburg American*. According to Earlesha Butler's 31-August-08 story for *THA* ("[USM luxury suite tested and approved](#)"), Saunders' luxury suite at M.M. Roberts Stadium is filled with "[d]esigner leather sofas and chairs . . . [f]lat-screen televisions . . . [and f]loral creations in gold and red vases." In the luxury suite that Butler described as "posh," more than 80 invited guests visited Saunders during the USM-ULL football game on 30-August-08. And according the Butler, it was the "lavish décor . . . that amazed the guests."



USM PRESIDENT MARTHA SAUNDERS speaks to a guest before Saturday's game inside the President's Suite. (ERIN PARKER | Hattiesburg American)

Things have changed a lot at USM since Saunders took over the AKL dome. More changes look to be coming, as Saunders appears to want to put her stamp on the campus as one that is a fun place to "study." Whether it is attracting "perpetual students" or filling up the stands at Roberts stadium, USM has had an enrollment growth-centric attitude in recent years, and the Saunders administration seems to be continuing that focus. Making USM a "party school" may be one way to increase the increase the institution's budget and continue to have the institution play a vital role in the "economic development" of South Mississippi. With the bulk of Mississippi's population residing south of Jackson, one could argue that there are as many potential nearby targets of a "party school strategy" for USM as there are on the whole southern continent.