

KΣ Charter Revoked, Hazing Mess at USM Growing Is USM President Martha Saunders in over her Head?

Enough has now happened concerning the hazing episode on the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi to question whether or not new USM President, Martha Saunders, is in over her head. In her [6-Sept-08 article](#), “Fraternity loses charter, house after campus hazing incident,” *The Hattiesburg American’s* Valerie Wells reports that USM has revoked the charter of KΣ fraternity and closed its on-campus facility. This decision results from a USM “investigation” of an [alleged hazing incident](#) at the fraternity house that has left a USM co-ed in intensive care from alcohol poisoning. As of Friday afternoon (5-Sept-08) that co-ed, the daughter of Melanie Besancon of Waveland, had been in the intensive care unit of Forrest General Hospital for nine days, where she has been receiving critical care treatment of septic shock and an enlarged liver.



THE KAPPA SIGMA fraternity had its charter revoked and its campus house closed Friday by the University of Southern Mississippi following a hazing incident in which two students were hospitalized. One student remains in intensive care at Forrest General Hospital. (Photos by ERIN PARKER | Hattiesburg American)

When questioned at a 5-Sept-08 news conference on the campus of USM, USMPD chief, BoB Hopkins, told reporters that if the young Besancon dies as a result of the incident, manslaughter charges could await those determined to have instigated the alleged hazing episode. Other USM officials have reiterated that hazing itself is a misdemeanor under Mississippi law, and Wells’ most recent report indicates that MS law provides penalties including six months of jail time and fines totaling \$2,000. Meanwhile, this story, like [others](#), continues to add to USM’s growing [reputation](#) as a “party school,” which is a designation that the USM family will likely wish to avoid, given past problems with SACS probation and *U.S. News & World Report’s* prior designation of USM as a Tier IV (out of 4) institution. A [prior report](#) here at USMNEWS.net indicated that *THA’s* readers were reminding the general public that KΣ fraternity was part of an alleged “gang rape” episode recently, while other *THA* and USMNEWS.net editorials and reports recounted the [details](#) of USM’s very recent court-sealed settlement with the family members of a deceased alumni who died in 2004 after a “beer pong” episode at USM’s ΣN fraternity.



THE SIGMA NU house at the University of Southern Mississippi. (File photo)

The most recent report from Wells also indicates that USM's chapter of ZΦB sorority is currently serving a 3-year suspension (of its charter) for a hazing incident that occurred in 2006, or two years after the beer pong death at USM's ΣN fraternity chapter.



USM President, Martha Saunders, reading a prepared statement about the institution's reaction to the alleged hazing incident at KΣ fraternity.

Saunders' demeanor during the 5-Sept-08 press conference was anything but confidence-inspiring. After reading from a prepared statement (see screen above), Saunders turned the whole program over to USMPD chief, Hopkins, and VP for Student Affairs, Joe Paul. Watching Saunders' non-verbal actions/reactions gave USMNEWS.net sources the sense that Saunders was hearing some of the details (from Hopkins and Paul) for the first time. Not only that, Saunders' stiff physical demeanor and shifty eye movements gave off a sense of guilt to some who viewed the press conference tape available at wdam.com, the web site of NBC's local television affiliate. Examples of the shifty-eyes can be seen in frames 4:43 and 4:45, which are just 2 seconds apart. These are inserted below for readers to examine.



As the frames above show, Saunders' stiff body posture is maintained, along with a seemingly uncomfortable pursing of the lips, while her eyes shift the better part of 180° from left to right. This occurs again other times, such as below at frames 5:48 and 5:52.



Sources tell USMNEWS.net that Saunders' main focus as USM president is to prevent, or deflect, bad news from tainting USM, while she seems content with letting others govern the institution on a day-to-day basis. Nothing about the 5-Sept-08 news conference, according to sources, would disabuse one of those beliefs. At this point in time, *THA's* Valerie Wells is increasingly becoming "the bearer of bad USM news," a tag sources say could work against her *local* journalism career. Those familiar with the long history of administration heavy-handedness at USM might recognize, according to sources, Saunders' eye-shifting as a means of "score-keeping" on the media's attendance, and also its questions and comments. In this light, USMNEWS.net is told that comments made at the end of the press conference concerning the elder Besancon's accusation that USM's KΔ sorority was also involved in the most recent hazing incident involving KΣ fraternity – comments that were quickly and vociferously defused by Paul, and to a lesser extent by Saunders, deserve further attention.