

SUNDAY

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WEEKEND EDITION • SUNDAY, JANUARY 11, 2026

LAWSUIT

A HAZING NIGHTMARE



PHOTO BY CHLOE NELSON

Sheri Roberts-Updike (left) wears the bands the Sigma Chi fraternity at University of Texas wore both at her son Sawyer's vigil and while hazing another pledge to spark a conversation about change. Roberts-Updike partnered with Charlotte Community Foundation CEO Shelley Strickland to start a scholarship endowment in her son's honor.

Port Charlotte woman sues fraternity, university over son's death, turning a family's nightmare into national impact

CHLOE NELSON
Staff Writer

PORT CHARLOTTE — After celebrating the 2023 holiday break with her son, Sawyer Updike, Sheri Roberts-Updike was sad to see him leave again.

Sawyer Updike was an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Texas, his dream school, she reminded herself. Reluctantly, Roberts-Updike drove her son to the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport.



S. Updike

It would be the last time she would see him alive.

Sawyer Updike died two days later. His Jan. 16, 2024 death was ruled a suicide by gunshot. It was the first day of second semester.

"I hugged him, kissed him, said I loved him, and then that's the last I saw him," Sheri

Updike-Roberts said, choking up at the memory of the airport drop-off.

Three days after his death, a text from one of Sawyer's friends changed everything.

Allegations of serious hazing from UT's Sigma Chi fraternity — which Sawyer was a new member of — came to light, catapulting the Updike family into an investigation, a lawsuit and now a Charlotte County scholarship aimed at rewarding students who speak out when something is wrong.

THE NOTICE

Sheri Roberts-Updike remembers the notice of her son's death like it was yesterday. She had moved from Austin, Texas to the Port Charlotte area to be closer to extended family after her son had moved to college.

Like right out of a movie, she said, a policeman showed up to her front door to inform her of Sawyer's death.

That day, his fraternity, the Alpha Nu

Chapter of the Sigma Chi Fraternity, called to tell her they would host a vigil in his honor that evening, an event Roberts-Updike was not given enough notice to attend.

Right off the bat, Roberts-Updike said she knew something was off. Her son was the star football player at his Texas high school before being accepted onto UT's trap and skeet team, a kid with plenty of friends and a future.

"He was good at everything," she said.

A big fisher at Charlotte County's Pond's Park and a hunter, Sawyer Updike was very quiet but had a lot of friends, known as "Smiley" to his baseball teammates for his feelings often written on his face.

When he was accepted to his dream program at UT, petroleum engineering, Sheri Roberts-Updike initially supported her son's interest in joining a fraternity, too.

More HAZING | A4

IN TODAY'S EDITION

RETIRING AFTER 26 YEARS

Longtime Charlotte County Attorney Jannette Knowlton will retire during a meeting Tuesday. PAGE C1



CCF FUNDING HELPS NONPROFITS

The Charlotte Community Foundation recently announced those who received funding through its Fall 2025 Competitive Grants Cycle. PAGE D1

ENJOY THE TRAIL RUN

A trail running legend advises beginner trail runners to enjoy the view and go easy. PAGE E8



VETERANS

Purple Heart City status is reaffirmed

Kevin and Lauren Wallace take part in ceremony at City Hall

DANIEL FINTON
Staff Writer

NORTH PORT — North Port is a Purple Heart City.

Being a Purple Heart City means a municipality officially recognizes and supports U.S. military personnel who were injured or killed in combat.

Kevin Wallace, a veteran who received a Purple Heart fighting in Afghanistan, and his wife Lauren, proclaimed the city's participation this week.

North Port's status as a Purple Heart City is now "reaffirmed" after it was declared one back in 2015.

The Wallaces have come a long way over the years. A project of theirs called "the Van of Valor" was designated this week as the city's "Purple Heart Legacy Memorial."

The Van of Valor project included Kevin and Lauren Wallace driving around the country on a 280-day, 27,106 mile journey across the 48 contiguous American states.

During their journey, they conducted interviews with 312 Purple Heart recipients and Gold Star families. A Gold Star family is the family of someone who died in the military.

The van, itself, has hundreds of veterans names. More than 300 are those of

the veterans interviewed, while more than 400 others are "memorialized" veterans who died.

For the time being, the van will be a "mobile memorial." In an interview with *The Daily Sun*, Lauren Wallace said there are plans for the van to have a permanent home in the future.

She said the reaffirming of the proclamation is important for a number of reasons.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Lauren and Kevin Wallace pose with a pair of proclamations and their Van of Valor, decorated with the names of various veterans.

More HEART | A6



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Hazing/ from A1

"I thought it was a good idea," she said. That quickly changed three days after Updike's death when a friend texted Roberts-Updike her son died, because of his addiction to cocaine — a habit forced on Updike by his fraternity.

ADDICTION, ABUSE COME TO LIGHT

Roberts-Updike contacted Austin Police Department, which opened an investigation into her son's death. Disturbing evidence from Updike's laptop and phone quickly began piling up.

From the content collected, Updike was said to have experienced the following hazing from his fraternity:

- Speared with a fish hook in the leg.
- Threatened by members, who said they would sexually assault his girlfriend if he didn't comply.
- Chest burned with cigarettes.
- Stapled with an industrial sized staple gun on his buttocks.
- Forced to dress in women's clothing.
- Some type of beating, leaving welt marks on his back.

And after a quick online search, Roberts-Updike found her son was not the only victim.

UT's Sigma Chi fraternity chapter had already been on probation after a member had died before Updike arrived in fall of 2023.

Then, the true colors of the Greek chapter and UT's accountability began bleeding through.

FRATERNITY, UNIVERSITY STAY TIGHT LIPPED

UT did not call Roberts-Updike until a month after he died.

A few months after her son's death, Roberts-Updike found a photo of another Sigma Chi pledge being hazed by its members — only this time, they were wearing the wristbands made for the vigil they had to honor Updike after his death.

No one gave an admission of guilt for hazing causing death, the one thing required under Texas law for a felony, said Roberts-Updike.

"Grief makes your brain like fog for a good while," she said. "And it was hard trying to just work with the police. There's code of silence. Nobody talks about any of this."

Then, the situation got murkier.

Nine months later, after a third Sigma Chi UT chapter member died by suicide, a death investigated by the university. While the chapter was given a hazing violation and the Sigma Chi Fraternity International Headquarters closed the UT chapter, there is no mention of the member's death in the hazing report.

The fraternity remains open. While it's rebranded as Alpha Nu, the same leadership is in place, Roberts-Updike said. After trying to connect with alumni about preventing hazing, she said they had no interest in stopping it.

"It's nefarious," she said. "It's a multi-pronged problem: the money, it's the alumni, and it's the lack of legislation. It's like asking

us to take the turkey away from Thanksgiving tradition."

But that didn't stop Roberts-Updike from putting up a good fight.

FAMILY LAUNCHES LAWSUIT

In November, the Updike family filed a wrongful death lawsuit, alleging that months of brutal hazing by members of the Alpha Nu Chapter of the Sigma Chi Fraternity and the forced introduction of illegal drugs drove their son into a psychological crisis that ended in his death.

On the day Updike took his own life, he first went to the fraternity house and was given cocaine and psilocybin mushrooms, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit names Sigma Chi International Fraternity, Alpha Nu Chapter of Sigma Chi Fraternity UT, owner of the fraternity Alpha Nu House Corporation and five fraternity members.

While it could take years until the case sees the inside of a courtroom, Roberts-Updike is confident she can achieve justice for the victims of hazing at UT.

"The evidence will tell the story," she said. "I'll say I feel blessed, but it's the wrong word, that I have enough evidence that I could do something about it."

NATIONAL REPORTS REVEAL ISSUE STILL RAMPANT

For Leanne Kowiak, whose son Harrison Kowiak died in 2008 from head injuries sustained during a hazing ritual at Lenoir-Rhyne University in North Carolina, only on Dec. 1 of this year did an

anti-hazing law pass — 17 years after his death.

While there 44 states that have laws against hazing, their laws are inconsistent in how hazing is defined, tracked, investigated, sanctioned and reported, according to a study, leaving many families support their child's enrollment without knowing the risks involved.

In fact, only 5% of hazing is actually reported.

Organizations like HazingInfo.org offer a more robust national database of reports, including rankings of the deadliest Greek life groups and colleges:

■ Nearly two thirds of hazing happens at public universities and colleges.

■ U.S. fraternities and sororities make up for nearly 80% of hazing deaths.

■ The 10 student organizations with the most hazing deaths are all fraternities.

■ Delta Kappa Epsilon ranked the highest in hazing deaths, followed by Lambda Chi Alpha and Pi Kappa Alpha, or "Pike"

■ UT in Austin, Texas ranks the highest in hazing deaths, eight.

■ One hazing incident at Northern Illinois University resulted in four deaths, as did one hazing incident at Grove City College, a private, conservative Christian liberal arts college in Pennsylvania.

■ Prestigious schools top the charts for hazing death, including Cornell and Yale University.

In her Port Charlotte home, Roberts-Updike memorializes her son through special keepsakes, including a big, giant teddy bear that wears his trap and



PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHERI ROBERTS-UPDIKE

Sayer Updike poses with his mom, Sheri Roberts-Updike, at the announcement of homecoming king and queen during a football match at Glenda Dawson High School in Texas.

ski vest and his high school football jersey in a shadow box. During Christmas, the family shares holiday memories of Updike.

"There's a club they don't wish on anybody, and it's all the moms of the sons who have died from hazing," she said.

A NEW FEDERAL LAW SHINES LIGHT ON HAZING

In 2024, the nation's first anti-hazing law, the Stop Campus Hazing Act, will require all U.S. colleges and universities to report hazing incidents on their public websites by the end of 2025.

Hazing is defined as "any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them, regardless of that person's willingness to participate."

According to UT's report, 22 hazing violations have been given in the past five years.

As for Florida campuses:

■ University of Miami reports no hazing found from July 1 to present, though other databases report three hazing deaths in the school's history, placing it in the top 20 U.S. college campuses with the most hazing deaths.

■ University of Tampa reported two findings of hazing this semester, resulting in the suspension of Sigma Phi Epsilon and deferred suspension, training and review for Alpha

Epsilon Pi.

■ University of Central Florida placed Tau Kappa Epsilon on probation this semester until the end of spring semester, requiring an advisor to be present at all new member events and a fine paid.

■ Florida State University placed Sigma Lambda Beta on probation for a violation in spring 2024 with hazing training after forcing members into doing calisthenics and other physical activities.

ADVOCACY, ONE STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP AT A TIME

While she waits for an update on the case, Roberts-Updike has turned her attention to advocacy, growing to a national reach most recently.

The mom started a program with the help of her son's high school in Pearland called the "Stand up, Speak up Sawyer Updike Memorial Scholarship Fund."

The fund rewards students who stand up for what's right, creating a domino effect of change.

"For me, it was like the Chinese philosopher says, 'the journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step,'" Roberts-Updike said. "And that was about the only thing I was capable of doing at the time, was that one step."

But to keep it going

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Hazing/ from A4
without the threat of funds running out, Roberts-Updike wanted to create an endowment with a local mission. After a serendipitous run-in with Shelley Strickland, CEO of Charlotte Community Foundation — what

Roberts-Updike called a “God whisper” — the pair worked to move the program to Charlotte County. “What I heard was a woman grieving for her son, and it also resonated with me,” Strickland said. “I lost my best friend to suicide. I have a son who was around

Sawyer’s age, so my heart just went out to her, mother-to-mother.” Together, Updike’s Texas high school and CCF partner to pick high school students as recipients. In April, the first student was chosen, Cornell Wesley — a student who knew

Sawyer Roberts-Updike and made it his mission to help students who were quietly struggling behind the scenes. “He had the experience of seeking out kids that he thought needed help and helping him,” Roberts-Updike said. Through her advocacy,

legal battles and her son’s story, Roberts-Updike hopes the community will apply their lessons to their own children’s college experience: “You have to educate yourself. It doesn’t matter if it saves one person, it’s worth it. It’s totally worth it, though I will never know.”

Want to donate?

Donations to the Stand Up, Speak Out endowment can do so at:

tinyurl.com/2b95w5zd



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Heart/ from A1

She said it helps turn a decade-old proclamation into something “tangible” for education and “remembrance,” with the help of the van as a rolling memorial.

Lauren Wallace noted there are about 25 Purple Heart recipients in North Port and more in the region. She and Kevin hope to meet them.

The couple officially moved to North Port in December. And they are already making their presence known.

Building Homes for Heroes, a national non-profit that provides mortgage-free homes to injured veterans and their families, teamed up with JPMorganChase and Lowe’s to give the couple a house free of charge in December.

Kevin and Lauren Wallace are paying the gesture back to veterans who need help.

Kevin said what he and Lauren have been doing is “crucial.”

Some don’t talk much about their past and bottle things up.

Kevin Wallace knows how that goes.

He earned his Purple Heart back in 2011.

KEVIN’S STORY

Kevin, a U.S. Air Force veteran, spoke about a mission where he was shot at by RPGs alongside other troops in Afghanistan who were also left injured.

He said as the ambush started, there were more than 100 Taliban against their unit consisting of 12 troops and a dog.

An RPG round flew right over his shoulder, blasted a wall behind him and threw him forward. They had to retreat.



SUN PHOTO BY DANIEL FINTON

Kevin and Lauren Wallace pose with the North Port City Commission.

Upon getting back to the vehicle to flee, another grenade bounced off of the hood of their vehicle and spiked into the Afghan sand.

It was a dud.

“We all would’ve been dead,” he said.

Wallace said after the retreat, they regrouped and returned. He was being “patched up” when the first wave of troops ventured back. But he eventually hopped in the back of a truck and went back as well.

He recalled a vehicle up ahead of him on the way back being struck with yet another RPG. Fortunately everyone survived. But they retreated again.

The troops wouldn’t give up. And Wallace still helped. Only this time from afar, assisting snipers.

He said everyone handles their trauma differently. He handles it in an unorthodox way that would make a “shrink shriek.”

He periodically listens to helmet footage.

He hears it all.

The screams.

The explosions.

“Whenever I thought I had a bad day and I thought I was going to be a bad father to my kid, or be bad to my subordinate at work, I would use that to

ground me,” Kevin said.

Nothing in the world, he said, is a big deal compared to that.

Kevin said that’s his own version of exposure therapy. These days he even listens back and laughs at parts.

“I’ve got shrapnel in the back of my neck — but no big deal,” he quoted himself as saying in the audio.

Kevin hopes that he and Lauren can continue to help veterans who have stories of their own. And they will do so from North Port.

PROCLAMATION DAY

On Thursday, the pair of proclamations were fittingly bestowed by Mayor Pete Emrich and Commissioner David Duval. Each of the elected officials are veterans.

“Our heart is filled with gratitude,” Lauren Wallace said in a proclamation speech.

She said she wished the Van of Valor could be there for everyone at City Hall to see, but it would be tough to get it up the stairs.

“You have given the Van of Valor a home. And in return the Van of Valor gives you a heart,” she said.

Emrich expressed gratitude to each of them.

“Thank you,” he said. “From the bottom of my heart.”

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