

2009

THE RATTLE

GRAND CHAPTER

FOUNDATION CHAPTER

FOR HIGH HOUSING



Remembering

Howard R. Alter, Jr.
Omega '41



Howard R. Alter, Jr.
Omega/Penn State '41

National President
1962–1966

Executive Director
1968–1984

National Board of Trustees
President 1992–1994

NIC Gold Medal recipient
1993

Fraternity Executives Association
President 1978–1979

Remembering Howard Alter

BY MARVIN MCCONAGHY (ALPHA PHI/ALABAMA '72)



For many field men, stopping by Stockland Farm to see Howard had become an often anticipated tradition. From L-R: Ty Humpert (Theta Tau/Western Michigan '97), Howard, Mike James (Gamma Phi/Nebraska Wesleyan '96), Jeff Roberts (Delta Alpha/Linfield '97), and Randy Harrington (Gamma Phi/Nebraska Wesleyan '97).

The first time I met Howard Alter, I was two weeks into my term as chapter president and a sophomore at the University of Alabama. He and Assistant Executive Director Dale Slivinske had been in the Deep South at a conference and decided to drop in on the chapters in Alabama. It was a chaotic Sunday night before student government elections on Monday, and the campus political machine was meeting in the basement at the moment Howard and Dale arrived. Last-minute campaign workers were in and out of the Theta Chi house, which was being used as a staging area.

I had been told long before that when the day came that I met Howard Alter, I would know where I stood with him, that he was nonsense and to the point. Now that the day had arrived, I was a wreck. At a hastily called house meeting, Howard made very brief remarks and, wanting to hear what was on our

minds, solicited questions. The first came without hesitation from an upperclassman intending to test the new young chapter officers: "Mr. Alter, what do you think of our machine politics?" The response was quick: "First, my name is Howard..." I don't recall the rest of the answer, but I realized at once that Howard could size up people and situations fast. I learned from that first encounter that he was someone on whom I could count for rock solid support.

Howard Alter was a man upon whom many counted. He was not only an only child, but his cousin, Jim Booth, was the only child born to any of his parents' brothers and sisters. They would be the ones on whom aunts and uncles would rely as they aged. He was the son who went to New Guinea in World War II where he served as a Seabee, then returned to help his father run the family feed and grain business and assume the responsibility for his extended family.



Howard being honored at the 1984 Convention with National President George Kilavos (Delta Xi/Valparaiso '55).

When then-Executive Director George Chapman, a founder of Howard's Omega Chapter, asked him to serve the Fraternity as a deputy regional counselor, George already knew that he could count on Howard just as the undergraduate chapter had when he was

elected treasurer his junior year and president his senior year. As he began his service, the chapters in western Pennsylvania found a mentor and a champion. Soon he became regional counselor, and in 1960 “his” chapters nominated him to Theta Chi’s Grand Chapter.

Howard turned to his mentor, Executive Director Chapman, and explained that he had business and family responsibilities and that he just wasn’t prepared for that investment of time. He recalled that Mr. Chapman wryly responded, “What makes you so certain you would get elected? You always lose once before you get elected.” Whether his mentor was giving him serious advice or dodging a declination of the nomination, I suppose we will never know. Lose, however, Howard did not. He was elected to a four-year term and began that service as National Chaplain of Theta Chi.

In 1962 in Seattle at the 106th Anniversary Convention, Howard Alter was elected National President, and service at the Fraternity’s highest levels would distinguish the rest of his life. Two years later in Miami he was re-elected National President. During his tenure, Theta Chi experienced phenomenal growth, installing 13 new chapters.

At the 1966 convention, Howard let it be known that after four years as National President, it was someone else’s turn to lead the Grand Chapter, and he became National Treasurer.

The following year, George Chapman announced his intention to retire after an



Interfraternal and alumnus brothers gather for the 2005 Slivinske Dinner. Brother Slivinske was a major part of Howard’s life.

unprecedented 20 years as Executive Director. Immediately a search committee was formed to find a successor to the irreplaceable Chapman. Scores of applications were received.

One Sunday Spencer Shank, a member of the search committee, drove to the Alter family farm to brief Howard on the committee’s deci-

sion. As they walked along the pasture fence after lunch, Brother Shank informed Howard that the committee had made a unanimous selection—Howard Alter. Howard protested, “I didn’t apply; I am not a candidate,” to which Brother Shank replied, “We know that, but you are our choice.” It was no mistake that the committee had sent Spencer Shank, as he had served as Howard’s National Vice President and was a persistent man who knew him well.

Howard continued to protest, citing family responsibilities and the 325-mile distance to the National Headquarters in Trenton, New Jersey. The committee had considered that and had agreed in advance to permit Howard to move the headquarters to Pittsburgh. Protestations turned into negotiations—but not the kind you might imagine. Given the difficult times into which college fraternities were entering, Howard refused the salary that was being offered, insisting on some 40 percent less. Eventually, Brother Shank made perhaps his greatest contribution to Theta Chi Fraternity by wearing Howard Alter into submission, and thus began the seminal journey of Howard’s life and for Theta Chi.

On January 1, 1968, Howard Alter became Executive Director of Theta Chi. He left his beloved Stockland Farm and drove six hours to Trenton, New Jersey, to begin the relocation of Theta Chi’s headquarters. However, at the



Howard at the Executive Office in 1984. Howard served Theta Chi as Executive Director from 1968 until 1984.



Associate Executive Director Dale Slivinske presenting Howard Alter with the Theta Chi for Life Award in 1983.

headquarters he found an office staff of exceptional tenure and experience. Mabel Oswaldt had served not only the entire tenure of George Chapman, but also that of Frederick W. Ladue and nearly the entire tenure of Alfred Aldridge. Gloria Metzger was in her 25th year. Howard quickly recognized the value of their experience and their loyalty. Almost instantly, he made the decision to keep the National Headquarters in Trenton and commute to Pittsburgh on weekends to attend to his family. That was a weekly 12-hour roundtrip commute that lasted 18 years.

The late '60s and '70s were difficult times for the college fraternity movement, rife with an anti-establishment culture, individualism, and discord at the national levels of many fraternities and interfraternal organizations. Yet at the helm of Theta Chi was the steady hand of Howard Alter, who with George Kilavos as National President during most of those years, called us to our core values. He was a friend to every brother who sought his helping hand, and was once again the man to be counted upon. Never afraid to listen, but with a candor and courage of conviction that was integral to his being, Howard led Theta Chi through the storms. He did the same in the interfraternal world as well, serving as president of the Fraternity Executives Association and helping heal the rift in the National Interfraternity Conference, encouraging the return of those who had withdrawn. At his side was his assistant and the man he would groom to be his replacement, Dale Slivinske, another strong and courageous man.

Howard Alter retired in 1984, becoming Executive Director Emeritus and was succeeded by Brother Slivinske. He was hardly through, however. He served on the National Board of Trustees for 10 years in his "retirement" including a stint as president, making

Bill Booth Initiated into Theta Chi Chapter

BY JOE D'AMORE (ETA PI/EAST STROUDSBURG '77), NATIONAL SECRETARY

On Saturday, March 7, 2009, William Booth of Plum Borough, Pennsylvania, was initiated into Theta Chi Fraternity as the fifth initiate of our Theta Chi Chapter. This special Chapter of our Fraternity was established to honor deserving men who did not have the opportunity to join the Brotherhood of Theta Chi as undergraduate members. The Theta Chi Chapter was approved by the National Convention on August 20, 1988. On May 3, 1990, Bruce D. Slivinske became the chapter's first member.



IHQ Staff members and Bruce Slivinske with Bill Booth at Stockland Farm. Front L-R: Fernandez, Carmichael, Taylor. Back: Hill, Zino, Fischer, Slivinske, Booth, Burns, Mayer.

Brother Booth is the cousin of Theta Chi's Executive Director Emeritus, Howard R. Alter, Jr. (Omega/Penn State '41). For many years, Howard and Bill shared a special relationship, far beyond being cousins. Bill remarked that Howard often acted as his surrogate father after his own father passed away years ago. It was Howard's wish that Bill be initiated into Theta Chi Fraternity as they shared much in their lives together, and to share Theta Chi would be very special for both of them.

The Ritual was conducted at the Presbyterian Senior Care Center in Oakmont, Pennsylvania, at 1 p.m. to accommodate Brother Alter, who had been admitted to the facility at that time.

The brothers who participated in the initiation ritual represented 14 different Theta Chi chapters from all over the United States. In attendance were:

President: P. Alan Bulliner (Beta Sigma/Lehigh '65)

Vice President: Rev. Dr. John J. Lolla, Jr. (Beta Omicron/Cincinnati '77)

Secretary: Bruce Slivinske (Theta Chi/GC Honorary '90)

Treasurer: Phillip Burns (Iota Lambda/Longwood '08)

Marshal: Carlton F. Bennett (Zeta Pi/Old Dominion '72)

Chaplain: Dale Taylor (Alpha Phi/Alabama '69)

Historian: Jonathan Fernandez (Tau/Florida '08)

Librarian: Jason Carmichael (Gamma Chi/Randolph-Macon '07)

First Guard: Michael J. Mayer (Epsilon Phi/Central Missouri '04)

Second Guard: Benjamin R. Hill (Eta Kappa/James Madison '02)

Assistant Treasurer: Corey Fischer (Iota Beta/Missouri State '08)

Alumnus Charge: Howard R. Alter, Jr. (Omega/Penn State '41)

Additional Brothers in Attendance: Joseph R. D'Amore, Jr. (Eta Pi/East Stroudsburg '77) and Bart Zino (Iota Theta/Central Florida '08).

Prior to the initiation, the attendees shared brotherhood at a special luncheon conducted at the facility.

Photo by Kyle J. Weaver



Photo by Kyle J. Weaver



More than 300 brothers and guests filed into St. Thomas of Villanova Church at Villanova University to honor Brother Alter at a memorial service held on July 17, 2009, during the summer Chapter Leadership Conference.

him the first to serve in all three of the Fraternity's highest offices. Throughout the remainder of his life, he was a fixture at national conferences and conventions, imparting sage wisdom, and using his gift for relating to all generations of Theta Chi. He served on the board of the Foundation Chapter and was elected to the North American Interfraternity Conference's board of directors. In 1993, the

NIC bestowed its Gold Medal, the highest award in the fraternity world, on Howard for a lifetime of service to Theta Chi and the fraternity movement. He was the recipient of every award that Theta Chi can bestow upon an alumnus brother, and Theta Chi's highest chapter award is named for him. Other awards filled his mantle including the Fraternity Executives Association's highest honor, and

those of Phi Kappa Psi, Zeta Beta Tau, Lambda Chi Alpha, and many others.

Howard Alter's greatest contribution to Theta Chi, I believe, came in the form of a profound and courageous demonstration of the essence of fraternity—Theta Chi's Helping Hand. In 1987 shocking news came that long-time associate and now Executive Director, Dale Slivinske, had been stricken with AIDS—a diagnosis that at the time was a certain death sentence. Howard immediately began to assist with the daily operations of the headquarters again. Moreover, with grace and courage in the face of this feared disease, he joined Dale's brother Bruce in becoming a constant caregiver. Dale derived incredible strength and ultimately peace as he drew on the brotherly love of these two men—one his brother by birth and the other his brother by Theta Chi.

As Theta Chi brothers and leaders of other national fraternities and sororities streamed to Brother Slivinske's bedside as he fought his losing battle, all were touched by Theta Chi's love, so movingly brought to life in the person of Howard Alter. As evidence, on the anniversary of Dale's death, over the next 20 years a group of interfraternity leaders and brothers closely associated with Dale have gathered from across the country at the black tie Slivinske Dinner in Pittsburgh to celebrate his life and honor Howard's courage, grace, and fraternal love.

The last time I saw Howard was in his hospital bed at his beloved home at the farm a few days before his death. He opened his eyes, acknowledged my presence, and gave me the opportunity to tell him of his impact on my life, of the lessons he taught me, the example he set, and the memories that will remain with me until memory itself becomes a sealed book. While I spoke for myself, I am certain that we both knew that I must be speaking for scores of us who were privileged to have had him share so generously part of his life with us.

A week later I would be back, honored to join past National President David DeVol and five other of "Howard's boys"—graying former field staffers—to bear him to the hilltop at the Plum Creek Cemetery, where were gathered eight Theta Chi National Presidents, scores of past National Officers, current and former staff, undergraduates, interfraternity friends, neighbors, and family. There, with military honors and the gratitude of Theta Chi for the richness of his life so selflessly shared, we said our farewell to Howard Russell Alter, Jr., Omega '41, knowing that his influence on Theta Chi lives on.