

# Campus death haunts family as binge drinking issues remain

by Amanda Vogt  
Chicago Tribune

In the hours before he was found lying face down in his fraternity room at Indiana University, Joe Bisanz, 19, attended a party where witness said he may have had several rum drinks but didn't appear intoxicated.

He was turning blue and not breathing when friends found him in the early hours of Dec. 13, 1998. Frantic efforts to resuscitate the honor student from Libertyville, Ill., failed, and he was pronounced dead nearly 12 hours later at a hospital in Bloomington, Ind.

His blood-alcohol level was .206 percent, over twice Indiana's legal limit, yet normally not enough to kill an otherwise healthy young man, according to a pathologist who performed a private autopsy months later at the family's request.

The circumstances of Bisanz's death haunt his family, who has doubts about how campus police, the county coroner and other officials handled the matter. They also question whether the university has done enough to curb excessive of binge drinking, a problem that continues unabated on many college campuses.

"There is not a moment when I don't wonder how and why Joe died," said his father, Gary.

No autopsy was performed at the time of their son's death, even though the family asked for one, hospital records show. The death

certificate, filed on Dec. 22, 1998, indicates Bisanz choked to death on his own vomit with alcohol a contributing factor.

The private autopsy proved inconclusive. Gary Bisanz and his former wife, Val, don't deny that alcohol may have played a role in their son's death. But they wonder what the university learned from the incident. Bisanz's fraternity - Pi Kappa Alpha - was expelled from the university in October after a pledge member was hospitalized with a blood-alcohol level of .375.

"How many students have to get sick or die before IU gets serious about making its campus safer?" asked Gary Bisanz. "I don't think the university recognizes that students are people entrusted to their care."

A Harvard University study of 14,000 college students between 1993 and 1999 found that while the number of students who engage in binge drinking remained steady at 44 percent, they were doing it more frequently. The study, published in 2000, defines binge drinkers as men who consume five or more drinks in a row or women who consume four or more drinks.

In 1999, 23 percent of the students reported engaging in frequent binge drinking, a 14 percent increase from 1993, according to the study.

Before 1999, when the 1990

Campus Security Act was amended, the nation's colleges made no comprehensive effort to track off-campus, alcohol-related arrests or disciplinary referrals, of-

The fraternity, which was on probation for an alcohol-related infraction at the time of Bisanz's death, wasn't suspended until the following February, according to Richard

She and Gary Bisanz are left to wonder to what extent alcohol may have been to blame for their son's death because, they say, crucial evidence may have been carelessly discarded or overlooked.

As emergency room doctors struggled to revive Joe Bisanz, campus police allowed fraternity brothers to clean up his room while an assistant dean at the university supervised, according to a campus police report.

A drinking mug, several pieces of broken furniture and the clothes Bisanz was wearing were discarded, the report indicated. Val and Gary Bisanz believe those were possible clues that might have explained how their son died.

"Their actions made us cry out, 'What in the world is going on here?'" said Val Bisanz. "They were destroying evidence of what happened to Joe."

Indiana University denied any wrongdoing on its part.

Detective Brooks Wilson of the Indiana State Police, who reviewed the university's investigation at the request of the Bisanz family, determined that campus police didn't try to preserve any evidence - other than take a bottle of rum from Joe Bisanz's refrigerator - because it initially appeared he would recover.

When the hospital notified university officials a short time later

that Joe Bisanz was in critical condition, police couldn't secure additional evidence because the room already had been cleaned, Wilson said. Still, he found no evidence of wrongdoing, writing that Bisanz's death, "while certainly a tragedy, was accidental."

In their effort to determine exactly what happened to their son, the family had his body exhumed almost 10 months after his death so that the Lake County (Ill.) coroner's office could perform an autopsy.

Dr. Mark Witeck, a forensic pathologist, determined that it was "unlikely" Joe Bisanz choked to death. While Witeck noted Bisanz's high blood-alcohol level, he concluded it was "not enough to normally cause death by itself in an otherwise healthy adult." He said the cause of death was "undetermined."

George E. Huntington, now-retired coroner who signed Bisanz's death certificate, defended his decision to forgo an autopsy. "The death was an accident and state law doesn't require an autopsy" in such cases, he said.

Val Bisanz still clings to her hope that someday she will find out how her son died. "It's just that you raise a child all those years and try to protect him, then you don't even get to say goodbye," she said. "That's the hardest part."

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officials said. Colleges were required to report only on-campus, alcohol-related arrests to the U.S. Department of Education.

Amended in 1999, the Campus Security Act now requires universities to report all alcohol-related infractions, both on and off campus.

The change in the law might account in part for the rise in arrests for campus liquor law violations, which increased 20 percent from 1997 to 1999, climbing to 37,732 from 31,358, according to the Department of Education.

In Bisanz's case, a 21-year-old member of Pi Kappa Alpha was arrested for allegedly purchasing alcohol for minors, but the misdemeanor charge was dropped when the student left the country.

McKaig, Indiana University's dean of students.

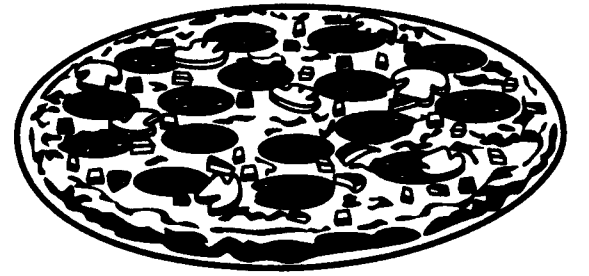
"In retrospect, we didn't do enough," McKaig said. "We were caught in the middle. There was so much pressure to hold the students accountable, yet they acted nobly and responsibly to try to save Joe."

Since Bisanz's death, Indiana University now notifies parents when students are arrested or referred to a disciplinary committee for alcohol-related violations, McKaig said.

Val Bisanz remains skeptical that college administrators are sincere. By trying to write off her son's death as merely alcohol-related, she said, university officials turned him into just another statistic. "That makes his death easier to dismiss," she said.

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