



THE GROWTH OF COURAGE

Eric Westacott is a Phi who defines courage. His determination to not only survive, but to excel after suffering a life-altering accident serves as inspiration and example for all who have heard his story. The following article is adapted from a speech Eric gave on the importance of courage in leadership to a group of Phi Delta Theta chapter leaders at the Presidents Leadership Conference this past January. In addition to speaking engagements, Westacott now works as a St. Louis lawyer having earned a law degree from Saint Louis University in 2001. Through the Eric Westacott Foundation, he also raises money for spinal cord research to find a cure for paralysis. The Foundation's annual golf tournament at Cherry Hills Golf Club in St. Louis is popular among many area Phis. For details on the foundation, the tournament or Eric's availability for speaking engagements, visit www.ericwestacottfoundation.com. Eric's complete Presidents Leadership Conference speech is available online at www.phideltatheta.org.

It's been about eight and a half years since I was sitting where you are. That was the summer of 1993 at Leadership College in Oxford, Ohio. I was just like you—wide-eyed, idealistic, ready to tackle anything and take on the world. I was about to begin my senior year. I was excited about the upcoming semester—rush, our chances to win sports, winning grades, my term as president, our active brothers in their new offices, new classes, and of course... meeting girls. In short, I was on top of the world. Although it wasn't that long ago, it seems that so much has changed for me since then. That change began on October 3, 1993.

It was a beautiful fall day. The sky was clear, the sun bright. It was still warm. We were in our second game of the Greek Softball Tournament. As last year's champion, we were looking forward to defending our crown and this second game was the marquis match-up.

Sigma Nu was our arch rival on the campus and we competed fiercely for everything. Whenever we lost a rushee, lost a leadership position on campus, or had competition in Greek Week, it came from Sigma Nu.

And, once again, in the softball tournament, the Sigma Nus looked to be the toughest opponent for us. As usual, we scored first and often. We were up by a handful of runs. I came up to the plate with two runners in scoring position. I got a perfect pitch and put a good swing on the ball. As I rounded first, I saw it carom off the wall in left-center, the outfielders frantically chasing it down. I thought to myself, "If I get after it, I might score!" I sped around third. Halfway down the third base line, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the ball fly over my left shoulder. The catcher had caught the relay throw and I was 'dead to rights out'. Quickly, I began to think. "Ok, you've got two options: slide, knowing you'll be out or plow him over, trying to jar the ball loose. If you plow him over you'll cause a huge brawl, get thrown out of the game and tournament, and create a hostile rivalry out of a friendly one—after all, I was our president and Kendall, the Sigma Nu catcher and a good friend of mine, was their president." Then I thought, "If you slide, like the rules dictate, then you'll be giving yourself up for out, and momentum will swing to the Sigma Nu side." Well, I got caught in the middle of my decision, and I did both.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. I remember diving headlong through the air at Kendall. The top of my head made contact with him in the middle of his right thigh. The ball squirted loose. I heard a loud pop. Somehow I ended up short of the plate, on my back, with my hat squished down over my eyes. I thought, "Get up! You haven't hit the plate and he's dropped the ball!" I tried to get up... nothing happened. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. It took me several seconds to draw a breath. Then, it hit me. "You've just broken your neck.."

My first thought was, "Stay calm, remain focused." Players from both teams began to gather around me. From my odd body posture, they could tell that my injury was serious.

Next I thought, "Tell Coby that you just broke your neck. He'll know what to do." Coby, our right center fielder, had

been in the athletic training program with me two years prior. Coby came over to me and said, "You've just got a stinger, that's all. You'll be fine in just a few minutes." I could tell by the tone in his voice he didn't believe his own words. I knew at that instant that I was completely paralyzed. I shouted to Coby, "No, Coby, I just broke my neck."

I heard several gasps from some of the onlookers. I could feel the tension growing in the swelling crowd. A hushed murmur became barely audible. I began to hear broken bits of comments and conversations.

It was then that I realized I was calmer than anyone around me. I knew I was paralyzed, I wouldn't be getting up, and everyone around was looking at me with a mixture of horror, panic, and disbelief. At that moment I knew that I had to remain calm. I told myself, "Yes, you're catastrophically injured and need help, but showing that you're upset won't do anyone any good. To get through this we'll all need strength and reassurance. It's up to you to calm the situation—to provide the example. You're still their leader—act like it!"

I had found my courage. But, where had it been up to this point and why had it come on so suddenly? These questions I asked myself over and over again in the ensuing months of my hospitalization and rehab, as I would need every bit of courage I could muster. At that time answers to these questions were incomplete at best, but every formulation contained one thing... the Fraternity... the Fraternity, its teachings, and my Fraternity Brothers.



It wasn't until a year or so after my graduation from SMS that I felt confident about answering those two questions. The answers emerged after reflecting upon my undergraduate career. I saw that I had courage, or at least the seeds of courage all along. It just took a major test to bring it out of me. It's my contention that all of us have these seeds. We simply need to encourage and foster their growth so that when we're tested, we may succeed.

I define courage to be, "*The product of strong character, positive attitude, and sound judgment when tested.*" As I see it, there are basically three parts—three principles. We have 1) strong character, 2) positive attitude, and 3) sound judgment when tested. So how does this relate to Phi Delta Theta?

STRONG CHARACTER

When I think of strong character, I am reminded of my very first introduction to Phi Delta Theta. When I stepped onto campus, I was determined to not go Greek. In my head, being a fraternity man meant paying for friends and being associated with nothing but beer-chugging lunk-heads. I had several buddies who were going to go through formal rush and they talked me into going through with them. "After all" they said, "it can't hurt to meet some new people. And, just going through rush doesn't mean you have to pledge."

Their argument sounded logical, so I went through formal rush. Formal rush meant for one weekend rushees paraded around to each fraternity house to attend a short presentation. After the presentation, there was a brief time to meet the members.

On the first day my suspicions about Greek life were confirmed. Each chapter I visited had the same identity. "We party harder and get more wasted than any other house," was their message. I enjoy partying as much as the next guy, but I felt there had to be more to being in a fraternity.

Sunday arrived and after the second visit, I was convinced I had just wasted an entire weekend. Then we went to the third house, Phi Delta Theta. Immediately, I could tell it was different. The guys seemed more polished, more aware of life. We sat for a short slide presentation. Then the current president, Lance, spoke. He talked about Brotherhood and what it meant, the importance of good grades, chivalrous conduct, and the *Silent Phi*.

"Silent Phi" he said, "is the way we conduct ourselves. It means that in competition, we hold our heads high—win or lose. No braggadocio. It means we are humble and thoughtful. It means we work hard and let our accomplishments speak for themselves."

The more I heard, the more impressed I became. Here was a group of men who believed in the same things I did, knew how to have a good time, and when to be serious. Here were men of dignity, responsibility, quiet confidence, and unshakable motivation. Here were men of strong character.

I had much to learn about character. As Phikeias, we were taught that, "*Character is who you are and how you act when no one else is around.*" How easy it is to maintain those admirable



qualities when we know we are going to be judged. Conversely, how easy it is to forget what is important when we are on our own.

We can change our character—we can better it. In my pledgship, it was often stressed to us that '*Those who identify well with others, identify with themselves*' So, by associating with people of good character, that good character is passed on. This is certainly true in my case. I am convinced that had I not been so fortunate to be involved with such high quality people in the Fraternity, I would not be before you tonight.

Strong character is also outwardly visible. After a 23-day stay in the hospital, I was moved to a special facility for spinal cord injuries in Colorado. My stay at Craig Hospital was lengthy and filled with loneliness. For almost five months I was apart from family, brothers and friends.

However, I did have many visitors. And the majority of visitors were Fraternity Brothers. More than 25 Brothers made the 775-mile journey from Springfield. Almost all of the staff at Craig marveled at the commitment and dedication that these guys had.

I can distinctly remember my physical therapist, Carole, saying to me, "Do you know how lucky you are, to have this many people come all this way to show you that they care about you? Do you know that most of our patients who've suffered an injury like this are lucky to have 1 or maybe 2 people who stand by them? Most so called friends can't handle such a change and just turn their backs."

"I haven't had a single person do anything of the sort," I told her.

Truly, every one of my Fraternity brothers had stayed right

there with me. They had written, called, sent gifts, visited, checked in on my parents to see how they were doing, helped my younger brother, Mike, with his pledgship at Missouri Zeta. They had organized a rally of support on the campus at SMS. They began to raise money to help me with my medical bills. They launched a golf tournament to raise money to help me pay for the rest of my education. They were, as Ernest Hemingway said in 1929, '*Grace under pressure.*' They, along with my family, had been the majority of my support—without which I think I might have given up.

Carole then said, "That's unbelievable! In my 11 years here at Craig, I've never seen anything like it. Those guys are amazing!"

Yes, those guys are truly amazing. They impressed a total stranger with their collective character. I can think of no better example to show the Bond of Phi Delta Theta and the incredible men who make it up. This is the character of a true Phi.

I am sure this is the same kind of men comprising your chapters. Character is something Phi Delta Theta instills and fosters.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE

I first learned the value of positive attitude in my time as an undergraduate Phi. The rigors of pledgship as we all know can be quite demanding—making good grades, participating in community service events, learning the history and lore of the Fraternity, bonding with pledge brothers, becoming involved on campus in other leadership roles. For me, it was even tougher, as I had committed myself to an academic program that required me to give a good chunk of my time to other endeavors.

Throughout this hectic time, my pledge brothers taught by example the importance of maintaining a positive attitude. It soon became second nature, and began spilling over into other aspects of my life. I found that almost any endeavor could be accomplished with positive attitude.

Immediately after my accident, I found my positive attitude to be the one thing keeping me on track. Shortly after the doctors had completed their physical examination and review of my x-rays and CT scan, I was diagnosed with quadriplegia. I was told that I had broken my neck and pinched my spinal cord between the 4th and 5th cervical vertebrae. The doctors informed me that I would never walk again; I was paralyzed from the chest down and that I would be lucky to ever sit up again. They said I would develop pneumonia, require a tracheotomy and breathe with the aid of a machine. They told me I would be institutionalized the rest of my life, and if I did not die in the interim—they gave me a 50-50 shot. Initially, I was horrified. Then I was mad. Finally, I calmed myself and realized that I was going to predict my own life. I was going to set goals—no matter how small or trivial—I was going to look forward to the future—I was going to rely on the positive attitude that I had learned in the Fraternity.

And as you can see, I made it! I can sit up. I never got a

trache. I never contracted pneumonia, and I'm not institutionalized. Although I remain seated before you tonight in this wheelchair, someday, when science allows, I will walk again. I am convinced that it is just a matter of time.

I am sad to say that I did not always keep my positive attitude. My stay at Craig Hospital tested my limits to maintain a positive attitude. When I first arrived, I thought that this was a place where miracles happen—where I could work my butt off and walk out one day to resume my life as if nothing had happened. Positive, yes, but totally unrealistic.

After the first week, I knew what lay before me and was eager to get to work. My parents' stay was over and they left for St. Louis, entrusting me to the capable hands of the Craig Staff. I awoke that Monday morning ready to do whatever necessary to heal myself. My enthusiasm and vigor were soon dashed. My doctor informed me that I had acquired a blood clot that ran the length of my left leg. He said it was so large that it even ran up into my veins just below my heart. The treatment was a Heparin IV drip to thin my blood and complete bed rest—indefinitely.

I was crushed. My hopes were destroyed, my positive attitude was lost. For me, this meant I was all alone in a foreign world with nothing to do but lay absolutely motionless in a bed until some doctor deemed me well enough to move. I had gained a negative attitude. From that point on, I let little else enter my mind. I kept thinking, "Here I am, a prisoner in my own body. I want to move. I want to get up. I want this to be over."

An extremely long week passed and I was released to resume therapy. I had set no goals and my attitude had not changed. I had expected to get right on with healing and returning to walk. It did not go as planned. In fact, it went nowhere. My poor attitude had blocked any progress that I could have made. I was mad at everyone and everything.

I stayed that way for almost a month. However, at Thanksgiving, things changed abruptly. Three of my pledge brothers, Rich, Scott and Todd had decided to spend their holiday with me. Their arrival marked the first visit from any of the Phis. I was so glad to see them, I could hardly speak. But, I doubt they would say the same of me. I was openly hostile. I was constantly bickering with one of my aides in particular. On the second morning of their visit, the fighting between this aide and myself was particularly bad. Rich, Scott and Todd had been in my room to witness it all. They could tell that I was not myself.

Later that day, Rich pulled me aside and said, "What are you doing!? That woman, this morning, was just trying to help you. All you did was yell at her. What is wrong with you? You are in here to get better. You are not helping yourself with this attitude. Take the time to say please and thank you—

"Most so called friends can't handle such a change and just turn their backs."

they're here to help you!"

I had been verbally slapped back into place. "You know, Rich, you're exactly right," I said.

The rest of their visit was better than any treatment or drug. I had regained my positive attitude and found solace in old friends. Now, I was ready to get better. From the time after they left until Christmas, I had the most dramatic recovery of any time. I went from no movement—apart from a slight shoulder shrug—to being able to operate a power wheelchair with my right hand. In terms of paralysis rehab, this was a giant leap. I attribute most of this to positive attitude.

To keep from ever losing my positive attitude again, I make a conscious effort every day to maintain it. I try to concentrate on little things. A smile for a stranger, a wave to a neighbor, a celebration for reaching a goal, or breath of air in the warm sunshine. Each of these reminds me that if I stay positive, the only limitations I have are those of vision.

SOUND JUDGMENT

Courage is not complete without sound judgment. I think this is the most important aspect to the definition. As C.S. Lewis wrote in 1944 in *The Unquiet Grave*, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point." The testing point is the stimulus from which the exercise of good character, positive attitude, and sound judgment are required. The outcome is courage.

If you think about it, every day we are tested and judgment is required. In your life as a Phi Delt, it's probably a decision concerning some issue within the chapter. Whether it is the disciplining of an active brother or the planning of social functions, sound judgment is required.

When I say sound judgment, I'm referring to well thought out, rationally and logically balanced decision making. I'm not talking about knee-jerk or emotional decisions. So, my decision to dive headlong into the catcher was not an example of sound judgment. That was just plain stupidity!

Sound judgment is sometimes unpopular, but nevertheless necessary.

In my second meeting as president, I was faced with a tough decision. Our social chairman was advocating a party for the upcoming week that would give us a leg up in the upcoming rush. I have to admit it now, the idea was excellent and the approach was novel. The problem arose with its execution.

The party was entitled, "Come Toss Your Nuts." The social committee had planned to cut out hundreds and hundreds of paper elephants imprinted with the slogan "Come Toss Your Nuts" and post them all over campus one week prior to the party. Chalk elephant footprints and peanuts were drawn all over the sidewalks of the campus pointing in the direction of

the Phi Delt house. No mention of what it meant was given until just before the party. Invitations were handed out explaining the gimmick. The elephants and chalk drawings were simply for creating questions in people's minds. At the party, invitees would find peanuts everywhere and décor fashioned with an elephant theme.

Unfortunately, the idea hadn't been proposed and voted on before the executive committee. The discussion in chapter meeting was the first it was heard by anyone outside the social committee. I knew two things. First, the breach of protocol meant that the idea would have to be tabled until the following week. This would put us into the rush week, nullifying our chance to get a leg up. Second, I knew that the title was too risqué for us.

So, there I was listening to the social chair expound about the glory of his idea, gaining popular support with each word. All the while I knew it had to be tabled. I tabled it. Several brothers were outraged. "How can you kill such a great ideal!" they exclaimed. I promptly told them that it hadn't come through proper channels, and no idea—no matter how good—could be approved by the whole chapter bypassing the bylaws.

Had I made a sound judgment? Who's to say? I think so. Looking back on it, we still had the party, only a week later, with the name changed to "Elephant Party". And we still had a great rush.

The strange thing with making sound decisions is that when made, outcomes are generally still in doubt. The best you can do is to think through the judgment process thoroughly and logically.

I doubted myself in my decision to go back and finish my undergraduate education. Part of me said, "You're crazy! You can't live by yourself—you can't even get out of bed or feed yourself a meal!" The other part of me said, "You've set your goals. You've made the proper arrangements. You have a plan—and most importantly, you have your Fraternity brothers to help you."

From August of 1994 until December 1995, including the summer term, the brothers at Missouri Epsilon fed me every meal, put me in bed every night, and made sure that I was taken care of. This includes brothers and Phikeias who had never met me before, but who volunteered without hesitation. My graduation is a testament to their dedication. With that kind of support, it's easy to make sound judgments.

For you, sound judgments will come from many circumstances. Before my accident, I found it helpful to remember a slogan learned in pledgeship, "*Eyes are always upon you.*" Whenever you're in doubt about what to do, think about your badge and the eye of the Phi in the middle. Realize that whatever your decision, someone will see the outcome. You are always watched.

So, when the test comes, exercise your strong character and positive attitude. Know that you're always an example to someone and that you have to be responsible for the consequences of your actions. Sound judgment will certainly follow.

In my estimation the three prin- [*continued on page 23*]

"The strange thing with making sound decisions is that when made, outcomes are generally still in doubt. The best you can do is to think through the judgment process thoroughly and logically."

[continued from page 20] ciples I've outlined for you make up courage. It's also my contention that the residual of this courage is leadership. Think about it... don't good leaders have strong character, positive attitudes, and make sound judgments when tested? Then it follows logically that the demonstration of courage is leadership.

You'll know when you've been a successful leader. It comes about when you leave the chapter and it's in better stead than when you entered it. That is the message conveyed by the last line of our pledge oath. "I will strive in all ways to transmit the Fraternity to those who may follow after, not only not less, but greater than it was transmitted to me." Once again, the Fraternity has taught us much about personal growth, courage and leadership.

I'd like to close tonight with one final story, that, I think, summarizes and illustrates quite well, each of the points I've tried to make.

Brad was my pledge trainer. As a Phikeia, I couldn't have asked for anyone better to teach me about the Fraternity and about becoming a Phi. He led by example. He was stern, yet was always there to listen. He was an athlete and a scholar. He had the ability to shoulder a ton of responsibility, stretch his day to accomplish any task, and still have time for his Brothers.

Brad and I developed a close bond that we shared throughout our years in the house together. It remained even beyond his graduation. We stayed in contact all through my accident and subsequent hospitalization. As I said earlier, Brad, like everyone else, treated me the same as he always had—still Brothers.

One day, not too terribly long ago, Brad told me that he was going to begin training for the Chicago Marathon. I knew this was something Brad had wanted to do for a long time. As I listened to his description of the training regimen, I thought, "Wow, I had no idea of the discipline and dedication it takes to do this. The dieting, the long hours running, the constant pounding on the body, the time sacrifices." But, I also knew that if Brad undertook a challenge, he was going to meet it.

Shortly after the race, Brad and I got together. I asked him, "So how was it?" He said, "You know, the first 12 miles or so, I felt great!

My legs felt good. I felt strong, confident that all the training was worth it. The next ten miles I still felt good, but I started to feel the beginning of some cramping in my legs. The two miles after that I just had to gut it out. The cramping was becoming almost unbearable, but I kept going. Then it hit me. I couldn't take the pain anymore. I had to slow down and walk. Then, even walking became a struggle. The pain kept intensifying. Finally, I had to stop and sit. I was crushed! I wasn't going to finish! All those months of training and sacrifice—all for naught! Then I began to think about you," he said. "I thought about your struggle and all that you've had to come through—the months and months of rehab—the surgeries—the daily struggle just to get out of bed. If you can do all of that, then I can finish this race."

Well, Brad got up and completed the Chicago Marathon.

It's hard for me to articulate how Brad's story affects me. I'm awed that my example could affect someone, especially someone of Brad's determination and character, so profoundly.

I think the message this story gives us is this: Brad's strong character, positive attitude, and sound judgment in the face of his test give us an example of courage—courage that provides us leadership to finish the race. When you think about it, isn't life just an extremely long race? My race, like many others, has been filled with hurdles, but I'm going to keep on running. I pledge to you that I will finish my race. And, if I can finish my race, then so can you!



Visit Phi Delta Theta's web site, www.phideltatheta.org, for the complete version of Eric's speech from the 2002 Presidents Leadership College. For more on the Eric Westacott Foundation, its annual golf tournament or for speaking engagements go to www.ericwestacottfoundation.org.