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## **At Ethics Camp, Not-So-Tall Tales From the Dark Side**

**By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN**

SANTA CLARA, Calif., June 21 2006— The campers gathered eagerly in a circle, awaiting scary stories, albeit without s'mores.

The tales were as chilling as Edgar Allen Poe. There was the mayor in Waldron, Ark., who had assignments with a prostitute and gave her a break on her city water bill. And a harrowing account of the errant technologist from the New York City medical examiners' office who, in the face of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, bilked the city out of millions of federal dollars.

Such tales of real-life corruption were what passed for fun at the Ethics Camp, for politicians and public officials here at Santa Clara University.

The two-day camp, at which counselors wore "moral compasses" slung around their necks, was perhaps the most novel effort to create "a culture of ethics and accountability," said Judy Nadler, a former mayor of Santa Clara and a senior fellow at the university's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, the host and sponsor.

At a time when Abramoff and Enron have become household names, the two dozen or so campers — including local city council members and ethics officers from Texas and Arizona — were a veritable optimists' club. Among them was Joanne SawyerKnoll, who just took the job of deputy chief operating officer of the new Office of Ethics and Integrity for San Diego, a city some have nicknamed Enron-by-the-Sea after revelations of financial irregularities.

Ms. SawyerKnoll, the former general counsel for the San Diego Unified School District, came to camp for support in her daunting mission: creating an ethical culture in a city reeling from scandal. Her hope is to offer proactive ethics education for more than 11,000 city employees.

"The public trust has been broken," Ms. SawyerKnoll said. "Ethics have become as necessary for cities as public works and homeland security."

The camp, which the university plans as an annual event, reflects a growing municipal ethics movement. Over the past five years, for instance, those who serve as "city ethics officers" — there are about 15 now — have joined state and city ethics commissions, federal prosecutors, whistle-blower hot lines and inspectors general in an effort to prevent municipal ethical lapses before they start.

Among items at the camp's show-and-tell was an Enron ethics T-shirt, bought on eBay, emblazoned with the words "respect" and "integrity." And instead of synchronized swimming and lanyards, there was talk about creating time for moral reflection and exercises on "taking ethics to the next level."

One exercise was a variation on the children's game red light/green light, in which campers weighed in on what to do if they met a constituent at a supermarket who told them that a fellow council member's proposal would benefit that council member's brother.

New officeholders invariably confront "a freight train of unavoidable dilemmas," in the words of Kirk O. Hanson, the center's executive director, who proceeded to list them.

Dean J. Chu, a council member from nearby Sunnyvale, chose to go to camp "as a continuing reminder of how you should behave." Mr. Chu added, "Unfortunately, the kind of people attending are not the ones who need to."

The idea of mandatory ethics training for public employees is the latest spin on character education (for politicians, rather than middle schoolers). Although state ethics commissions and codes have proliferated since Watergate, cities are beginning to try more ambitious programs.

In San Francisco, for instance, the ethics commission has the power to take proposals directly to the electorate — and has done so with successful ballot measures involving partial public campaign financing

Next month in Scottsdale, Ariz., a new citywide ethics initiative is in place to train the workforce of 2,700, from garbage haulers to the mayor. It is an effort to improve on a "piecemeal approach to ethics," said Teri J. Traaen, the city's general manager for human resources and a co-chairwoman of the initiative.

Even Providence, R.I., where a former longtime mayor, Vincent Cianci Jr., is serving a federal prison sentence, is working on an ethics code.

"I don't think we've become more unethical," Ms. Traaen said, referring to distressing headlines that seem to pop up daily. "I think we're more candidly talking about it."

**Beyond morality, corruption is an economic issue, said Carla Miller, an ethics co-officer for Jacksonville, Fla., who, as a former federal prosecutor, helped convict the former mayor and president of the State Senate on corruption charges.**

**"We have billions of dollars going down the tubes," said Ms. Miller, who started a Web site, [cityethics.org](http://cityethics.org), to track the movement.**

**Minor transgressions, not just breathtaking corruption in high places, contribute to a culture in which unethical conduct is accepted, Ms. Nadler said.**

**"It's the office worker who goes into the secretary's desk and pulls out a postage stamp to mail a birthday card, the person who mows the grass in a city park and agrees to help a neighbor trim a tree with city property," she said.**

**In the end, Ms. Miller said, the scariest campfire story is that of widespread public disillusionment.**

**"We should rename this 'Ethics Boot Camp,' " she added. "It should be, 'Sergeant, wipe that smile off your face.' Because this is a war, and we're losing."**