
DePauw Fraternities:

More than a Story in BLACK and WHITE

By Kathleen Furore

Dateline: Cornell University, 1906.

On this college campus in Ithaca, N.Y., 12 young black men—forbidden access to dormitories, social organizations and cafeterias because of race—form a study group that eventually becomes the nation's first historically black Greek organization: Alpha Phi Alpha.

Others are destined to follow.

—In 1908, Alpha Kappa Alpha becomes the country's first black sorority when it is founded at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

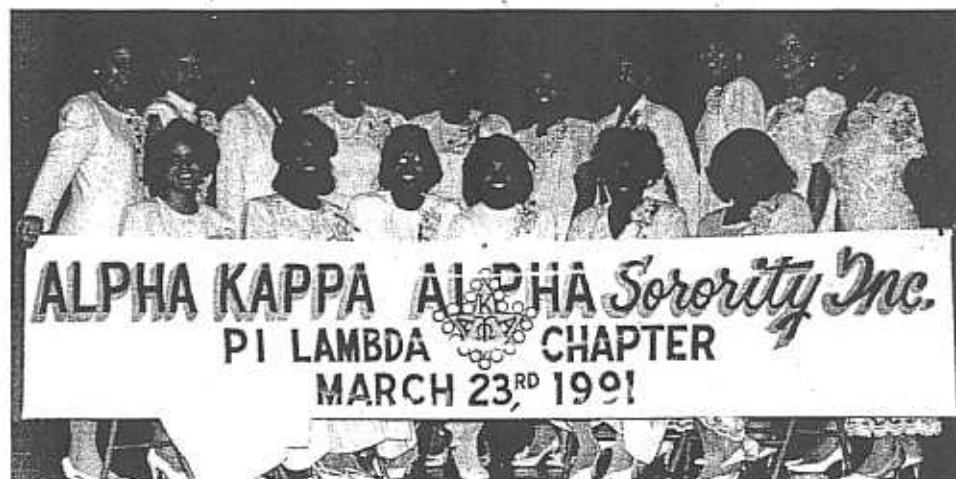
—And by 1922, six more groups—three fraternities and three sororities—have joined the roster of black Greek organizations.

Dateline: DePauw University, 1991.

It is March 23. Twelve young black women are celebrating the official chartering of the DePauw chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha—the first historically black Greek organization ever to be granted a charter on this Greencastle, Ind., campus.

Approximately one month later, 10 members of Kappa Alpha Psi (a fraternity founded in 1911 at Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind.) secure approval from DePauw's Board of Trustees and their national organization—approval which enables them to obtain their charter and become the first historically black fraternity at DePauw.

The racial climate, of course, has changed dramatically since the founding of Alpha Phi Alpha in 1906. Yet the members of DePauw's first black Greek letter societies share a common bond with those who pioneered the minority organizations some 85 years ago: all have built historically black fraternities and sororities, from the ground up, at predominantly white universities.



This page: The women of Alpha Kappa Alpha. (Photo: Vicki Legerwood)

At right: The men of Kappa Alpha Psi. (Photo: Karl-Heinz Dukstein)

Just why was it so important for groups like Alpha Kappa Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi to establish a presence at DePauw? What drives the students who have worked so hard to obtain the charters? And what do these historically black Greek organizations bring to the Greek system and the campus as a whole?

There are substantive answers. The alumni of historically black organizations wield a great deal of power within black communities. The minority Greek groups place academics, community service and life-long commitment above participation in social activities. The presence of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi has not only strengthened the University's standing as a national institution but also stimulated interaction between the black and white students of DePauw.

A Network of Influence and Power

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bill Cosby and Michael Jordan, Shirley Chisholm, Roberta Flack and Marva Collins.

What they have in common, besides their fame, is affiliation with historically black Greek organizations—a fact which illustrates why success is so closely associated with fraternity or sorority membership in many minority students' minds.

Add to that the networking opportunities available to black Greek students and alumni and the predominance of Greek life at DePauw, and the forces that fueled the efforts to charter Alpha Kappa Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi become increasingly clear.



"When I came to DePauw as a freshman, I found that [participation in] Greek life was about 90 percent," recalls Steven L. Rutherford, a senior from Indianapolis and president of the newly-chartered Kappa Alpha Psi.

"But I didn't become involved because I had my mind set on one fraternity," he continues. "It was the one that my high school principal, a teacher who helped me a great deal, and most of the prominent blacks in Indianapolis belonged to, Kappa Alpha Psi."

Junior Marc P. Sultzer of Indianapolis agrees with Rutherford, adding to his fraternity brother's comments an experience which underscores the important role networking plays in black Greek students' lives.

"I didn't know anyone when I went to Cleveland to participate in the Inroads Program for minority students," he relates. "But I met an older Kappa Alpha Psi who told me that if I ever came back to Cleveland, I would have a place to stay."

Charles R. Richardson, DePauw's associate director of admissions and director of multicultural admissions, also concurs with Rutherford.

"Because of the dominance of Greeks on campus, the minority students feel the need to be part of something," says the member of and advisor to the DePauw chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi. "And because almost every black of national prominence is affiliated with an historically black Greek organization, membership in one of those fraternities or sororities becomes a very emotional issue."

Indeed, the names of those associated with one of the eight black Greek groups, with a total membership of some 800,000, read like a Who's Who of African-American politicians, educators, entertainers, athletes and religious and civil rights leaders.

Mayors Tom Bradley, Michael White and Johnny Ford; congresswomen Katie Hall and Yvonne Braithwaite; former Superintendent of Chicago's Public Schools Ruth Love; athletes Gale Sayers, Oscar Robertson and Wilt Chamberlain; Bishop Leontine Kelly; and civil rights activists Jesse Jackson and Vernon Jordan '57—all are not only members of historically black Greek organizations but also role models for America's minority youth.

All Greek groups do, of course, boast successful, famous members. But it is doubtful that any members of predominantly white groups would echo Coretta Scott King (an honorary Alpha Kappa Alpha), who has cited family, church and the fraternity or sorority as the leading forces in the lives of black people today.

Traits That Distinguish

While it is easy to grasp the appeal of the networking opportunities afforded members of minority fraternities and sororities, it might be more difficult to see—at least on the surface—what differentiates historically black from predominantly white Greek organizations.

After all, both use a common alphabet; wear their letters; have songs, crests and colors; operate according to nationally-established by-laws; recruit selectively; initiate secretly; elect officers; pay dues; attend regional and national conventions; and belong to their universities' Interfraternity and Panhellenic Councils.



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— Dean Robert R. Smith

But a close look beneath the surface reveals a stronger emphasis on community service and post-college commitment by the historically black organizations—an emphasis that attracted students such as Jill L. English and Ingrid M. Wilder to Alpha Kappa Alpha.

"I think that the traditionally white groups emphasize the collegiate experience," says English, a junior from Indianapolis and president of her sorority. AKA was founded with a commitment to social and economic improvement for all mankind. "I liked the fact that Alpha Kappa Alpha stressed the life-long commitment and the importance of giving something back to the community. In a white house, I wouldn't have felt I was nurturing the traditions I've known or helping the community I'm from."

Wilder, a senior from Atlanta, Ga., also believes strongly in the need to contribute to the community from which she came.

"It's important because that's the community that invested in me," she comments. "People did a lot to enable me to go to a school like DePauw. They've empowered me; now it's important for me to give the same opportunities to others."

Projects undertaken by Alpha Kappa Alpha demonstrate this on-going commitment to service at both the local and national levels.

The sorority has sponsored a lecture entitled "AIDS from the Minority Perspective" on campus and teamed with the Kappa Alpha Psi's members for a community project which brought over 30 Greencastle youth to DePauw for a day.

Members also have helped tear down and rebuild houses for struggling single mothers in Indianapolis as part of The Fountain Square Project. Nationally, Alpha Kappa Alpha has sponsored the Cleveland Job Corps Center since 1965 and contributes to the African Village Project by adopting villages and then financing educational, health and public works projects in those Third World communities.

Kappa Alpha Psi, too, emphasizes achievement and community service—aspects of the fraternity that held a strong appeal for Sultzter.

"The reason I chose Kappa Alpha Psi is that the whole foundation of the fraternity is achievement in every field of human endeavor," he explains. "I just couldn't find anything that specific that I could grasp onto at the other fraternities."

Consequently, Sultzter and the other Kappas continue to work with Greencastle youth. They also travel to School 44, an inner-city public elementary school in Indianapolis, where they talk to, play with and tutor underprivileged students.

"We're there to help give these kids a sense of achievement, to let them know someone cares," says Sultzter.

"We act as role models and give back to the community where we began," adds Rutherford, who conceived the School 44 program when he was doing an internship at IBM and was sent to the school to demonstrate a computer system the company had donated.

"After all, there was always someone helping us along the road," he continues. "So we feel we should provide that same kind of nurturing. We tell the kids that if they study, they can do whatever they want to do!"

On the national front, Kappa Alpha Psi is a primary participant in Africare, a program that offers assistance to African nations; sponsors schol-

arship, guidance and counseling programs for minority youth; holds the annual C. Rodger Wilson Leadership Conference during which fraternity policies and the attributes needed for leadership are examined; and actively supports organizations such as the World Conference of Mayors.

Says DePauw's Assistant Dean of Students Robert R. Smith: "The foundations of the historically black Greek organizations are based more on education, community service and philanthropy—a fact which may help others find new meaning to the word 'fraternity.'"

The Minority Contribution

Enrollment of minority students at DePauw is on the rise: the number of blacks on campus has risen from 29 in 1986 to a total of 134 for the 1990-91 academic year. And as more black students arrive on campus, and efforts to step up the flow of all minorities increase, the presence of historically black Greek organizations takes on even greater importance in the University's quest to become a truly national institution.

The Kappas took their application to DePauw's Interfraternity Council's February meeting. Representatives voted 25-1 to approve their application. Junior Gregory S. Portell, president of the IFC, speaks to the issues that were discussed during the meeting.

Steven Rutherford, Kappa Alpha Psi president, was instrumental in setting up a program at School 44 in Indianapolis. The Kappa tutor, talk to the children and (below) give them the attention they crave. (Photo: Rich Miller, The Indianapolis News)



"The Kappas' application clearly had the support of all 13 members of the IFC," he says. "No fraternities at DePauw are racially exclusive, but the traditionally black fraternity serves the needs of a number of DePauw's minority students."

"As minority enrollment increases, it is important that the system adjust to meet the needs of all students," Portell says. "With the changing face of the campus population, we have to change what we offer—and that not only opens up a healthy dialogue but also presents the challenge of marketing all our organizations to minorities."

"They are not a social fraternity," continues Portell. "We gain what they have, a strong service base. They gain our structure."

"The presence of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi will enhance the appeal of DePauw to minorities," adds Dean Smith, who also believes that the groups "will make a unique and significant contribution to the University and encourage interaction between white and minority students."

In fact, the interaction about which Smith speaks already has occurred, disproving skeptics who feared the arrival of traditionally black Greek groups would divide rather than unite the campus.

"I probably wouldn't have any interaction with members of the white Greek organizations on campus if it wasn't for AKA," admits English.

"We all have something in common now," says Junior Charnita V. West, an AKA member and Atlanta native. "We're not as hesitant to approach one another ... and I find that white students come up and want to know about us and what we're doing. I think this will further our educational experience."

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— Jill English

Wildar, too, views her sorority and Kappa Alpha Psi as unifying forces on campus, adding one fact overlooked by those who fault historically black Greek groups for being separatist.

"I don't think we serve to divide, we just offer a different mindset," she offers. "And besides, we're not open solely to black students."

Even minority students who have pledged predominantly white fraternities and sororities welcome the addition of the historically black organizations.

"Although it wouldn't have influenced my decision [to pledge a white house], I think it's a good idea and will help diversify the campus," comments Nicolette M. Johnson, a junior from Anderson, Ind., who belongs to Alpha Phi. "It's a good move to attract minority students ... and I think people will be more comfortable meeting and mingling as a group since most campus social events revolve around house activities."

The pairing of Kappa Alpha Psi and Alpha Phi in the Special Olympics and the campus-wide open forum on race relations sponsored by Lambda Chi Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi are two instances



AKA Graduate Advisor Nadine Bonds (left) from the Alpha Mu Omega chapter in Indianapolis and AKA President Jill L. English. (Photo: Vicki Legenwood)

that illustrate the historically black and traditionally white Greek organizations are furthering understanding and interaction between the races at DePauw.

In the total University perspective the presence of black Greeks on campus opens new doors for students of all races; and second, it legitimizes DePauw's desire to integrate the campus community and becomes a powerful tool with which to recruit minorities.

Last Words

There are, of course, those who question the need for historically black Greek organizations at DePauw; those concerned that the existence of two new groups will negatively affect membership at existing fraternities and sororities; those who feel threatened by something so different and so new.

Dean Smith, however, says there is no need to worry, since members of historically black Greek organizations "... have generally already made a conscious decision not to join predominantly white organizations."

And Richardson says that all organizations "... should be more comfortable knowing the minority students had a choice."

But perhaps Rutherford sums up the issue best when he concludes with these words:

"Being new and different is not bad. If an organization is dedicated to the University and the community, it can only be beneficial. If people look at our dedication and the work we've put forth, they'll realize that this is not an issue of black and white but of the positiveness our organization brings to the campus and the community. Our presence, and that of Alpha Kappa Alpha, afford all students a different opportunity—a chance to look into something new."

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