

The Washington Post

A Century of Sisterhood



Diamond Sorors, or 75-year AKA members, Edythe Hardway, 95, left, of Knoxville, Tenn., Alyce Williams-Henderson, 95, of Richmond, Calif., and Ollie Miller Phillips, 98, of Baltimore. (By Susan Biddle -- The Washington Post)



Members of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the oldest black sorority in the country, are in Washington for the group's 100th anniversary. Above, Zillah Wesley of the District chatted Wednesday with Shari McCoy, left, Kelli McCoy Burkett, Shelvie McCoy and Doxie McCoy at Bloomingdale's in Chevy Chase. (By Katherine Frey -- The Washington Post)



Alpha Kappa Alpha notecards, clothing and jewelry were among the items for sale at the gathering. (By Susan Biddle -- The Washington Post)



25th Supreme Basileus soror Norma Solomon White, left, 24th Supreme Basileus Eva Lois Evans and 21st Supreme Basileus Faye Beverly Bryant sing an Alpha Kappa Alpha spirit song Friday. (By Marvin Joseph -- The Washington Post)

A Century of Sisterhood

Almost 25,000 Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Members Meet in Washington

By Lonnae O'Neal Parker and Sindya N. Bhanoo
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Monday, July 14, 2008

By 7:30 in the morning, nearly 1,000 ladies began their fitness walk around the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. Many wore pink sweat pants with a double row of green piping. Some wore dark green Converse tennis shoes with a salmon pink toe. Others went hard, head-to-toe pink with just a hint of green sparkle.

There were those so devoted to the Alpha Kappa Alpha theme -- Economics, Service and Partnerships -- in honor of the sorority's 100th anniversary that they walked with a bit of attitude, swaying and chanting. It was serious fitness-promoting. But as the sisterhood likes to say, Alpha Kappa Alpha is a serious matter.

The walk kicked off the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Centennial "Boule" Convention, which runs through Friday and is bringing nearly 25,000 "sorors," from 975 chapters around the world, and an obsession with all things pink and green to Washington. It is a time of assembly, much as it was a hundred years ago when college was new for the fewer than 1,000 African Americans just beginning to distance themselves from nearly 250 years of bondage with the equalizing promise of higher education.

Conceived as a social and service organization by undergraduate Ethel Hedgeman Lyle and founded on the campus of Howard University, AKA was the nation's first black sorority and counts the late civil rights activists Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King, actresses Phylicia Rashad and Jada Pinkett and singer Alicia Keys among its members.

When AKA began, blacks were largely confined to a handful of black colleges, and the terrorism of lynching was on its way to claiming thousands of lives. In those days, being "on line" was a term reserved for dressing alike, learning history, and learning ritual steps and songs along with all the other "ivies" who made up your pledge class.

Some AKAs have lived to see profound changes. Ollie Miller Phillips, 98, a retired high school teacher from Baltimore, said a number of sororities rushed her 76 years ago, "but somehow I was attracted to AKA more than any others." You had to be active in the campus community. You "weren't vain, but there was a certain amount of pride and self-worth," Miller says.

Yesterday, at the anniversary luncheon, Phillips and other members who have been in the sorority 75 or more years sat together as thousands cheered them. "It's wonderful," she said, beaming. "You feel it from way down. You feel like you just want to hug everyone."

Today, AKA has more than 200,000 members, and the women who joined in the decades after Phillips benefited from an established network of professionals. The organization boasts civil rights leaders, judges, doctors, lawyers and educators, and membership has meant that there is usually another AKA close by, ready to do an extra bit of looking out.

"These are people you can call, and they will pick up," said Mary Terrell, who pledged in 1964 at Howard. Terrell, 64, a retired D.C. Superior Court judge, said her career benefited from contacts with her sister AKAs.

One of Terrell's AKA sisters at Howard was former Washington mayor Sharon Pratt. The two stayed friends, and after Pratt was elected mayor in 1990, she appointed Terrell to a position on the Employee Appeals Board. Later in her career, another AKA used her political connections and persuaded then-Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) to sponsor Terrell for a federal judgeship.

Standing in front of towering pictures of AKA founders, Angela Sherrod, 55, of Sacramento snapped photos with Shenika Hall and Angela D.G. Davis, two members from Georgia who joined the sorority with one of Sherrod's two daughters, both of whom are AKAs. Sherrod said she has seen women she went to high school and college with. "At the airport, I ran into someone I hadn't seen in more than a dozen years. We just hugged and screamed."

Davis, 31, said she came "just to be a part of it. Just to say we were at the celebration for 100 years."

Those celebrating the centennial week will discuss AKA's initiatives in entrepreneurship and health. They will ponder how to educate voters and increase voter registration in African American communities. And Thursday, they will march with the eight other historically black sororities and fraternities from Congress to the White House in a show of strength for their community service agenda.

That will leave just enough time for more than 50 receptions, high teas and parties. For many, this means securing the perfect pink-and-green outfit to dazzle.

In a cavernous exhibition hall, much of the fellowship of Alpha Kappa Alpha yesterday was retail: 11 aisles of pink-and-green stationary, T-shirts, rhinestone pins, card holders, and diamond and gold jewelry with the AKA shield. There were AKA tunics and an AKA shower cap. Sorority sisters lined up in double rows to score the \$110 Centennial sweat suit.

Over the years, AKAs gained -- critics say cultivated -- a reputation for emphasizing materialism, and a more pronounced one for encouraging a light-skinned or long-haired aesthetic. Sherrod, who joined the sorority 10 years ago, wanted to pledge AKA in college, but her parents called it elitist and vetoed the idea.

AKA spokeswoman Melody M. McDowell said "we remain true to our core mission, which is sisterhood and service. We've given away millions in scholarships, we're into voter registration, voter education, we're into leadership."

And if, occasionally, over the years, AKAs have been known to chant at parties:

When we wake up in the morning

And get out of bed

We look into the mirror

And we shake our pretty heads

We are conceited

And that's no lie

We'll be conceited AKAs until the day we die,

then it was all in good fun. That kind of peacockism is a long-standing tradition in the black community and harkens back to African ceremonial costuming. It was fueled by the need for self-recognition in the years before blacks held any status in the larger society.

And it has fueled rivalries. The fiercest is between the AKAs and another black sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Inc., which boasts its own impressive list of members and accomplishments. Their competition informs campus rumor mills, quests for step-show bragging rights, and, for decades, a standard song at AKA weddings: "*Don't let my daughter go Delta!*"

That, too, is mostly all in fun. Mostly.

Like all the black sororities and fraternities facing competition from the expanded organizational options for African Americans, AKA's fiercest debates are existential. Centennials are marked by duality; celebration is tempered by questions of direction and viability.

Last week on TheRoot.com, AKA Autumn Saxton-Ross, a health and wellness coordinator in Montgomery County, wrote that although the sorority has a distinguished history of collective work and service, "I worry about what message we are sending in the last photo taken in our publication, the Ivy Leaf, which showed our president [and other officials] on Howard's campus in full-length furs. . . . I worry about the caste system created by a \$1,908 VIP pass" for Boule.

Sophia A. Nelson, corporate counsel for a Northern Virginia contractor and a member of one of the Boule host chapters, Xi Omega, was initiated into the sorority in 2005, but says she wanted it since she was a teenager. She says for the sorority to live up to its promise, its members have to work. She calls president Barbara A. McKinzie's emphasis on economic empowerment vital, but says that women also are "looking for that connection. They want a feel for the women they are with. They want the camaraderie."

Women have many more options, she says, book clubs and professional black women's organizations, that offer intimacy. "The [black sorority and fraternity system] involves a lot of financial investment." Additionally, "most people are really busy and don't want to give up that first Saturday every month. Sorors are married with kids and lots pulling at you." For those coming in new, the challenge is "how do we move it forward, without losing who we are?"

She thinks the sorority has addressed some of its long-standing issues. There are AKAs "of every shade, every hue," Nelson says. The more difficult challenge is "how do we compete in terms of our service to mankind in a world of nonprofits?"

It's a serious matter. But she thinks the halls of the convention center, bathed in pink and green for the sorority's 100th anniversary, are a beautiful place for thousands of her AKA sisters to come up with answers.

Lonnae O'Neal Parker is a nonactive member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.