



AKA Sorority is 100 Years Strong

By Robin Mazyck
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WASHINGTON, DC -- A sea of pink and green descended upon the U.S. Capitol this month, as more than 23,000 members of the world's oldest, predominately African-American sorority celebrated their 100th birthday.

Thousands of college-educated women of all ages and ethnicities came from around the world to pay tribute to [Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.](#), July 11-18, in Washington, D.C., the same city where it was founded by a group of Howard University women.

Service to All Mankind

Worldwide, there are nine predominately black fraternities and sororities - [Alpha Phi Alpha](#), [Alpha Kappa Alpha](#), [Omega Psi Phi](#), [Delta Sigma Theta](#), [Zeta Phi Beta](#), [Phi Beta Sigma](#), [Kappa Alpha Psi](#), [Sigma Gamma Rho](#) and [Iota Phi Theta](#). Each one was founded on Christian principles and work to make their communities better.

Much like the other sororities, service to all mankind lies at the heart of AKA - along with a strong belief in God.

"We've not let society dictate our inclusion of God in our sorority," said Gloria Brown of Charleston, S.C. She has been a member of the sorority for more than 30 years.

"We thank God for where He has brought us from. Unbelievable! It has been 100 years: 1908-2008," Brown continued.

AKA has more than 200,000 members has become a beacon of light for millions of women globally. The organization has hundreds of chapters in the United State and around the world.

"It's amazing. I have a friend, a sister no matter where I go - Japan, California, Alaska, Africa," said Erica Bell of Godwin, N.C. "And we have the same goals."

Mission: Volunteerism

Today, the sorority focuses on five different platforms, one of which includes nurturing the black family - specifically black men. Each chapter is allowed to carry out the mission however they choose.

Geraldine Watson of Bartow, Fla. has been a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha since 1956. Her chapter is carrying out this particular platform through a program they started called "Save our Sons."

"Save our Sons" works with middle school and high school children by teaching them a variety of life skills through mentors.

"We first started working with a small group of young boys, but the program became so popular that girls began attending also," Watson said. "We couldn't turn the girls away. We had been meeting in one of the area churches, but the group was too large, so we had to move."

AKA also encourages entrepreneurship among women, economic empowerment, health and wellness, and education, among other goals.

Each year, approximately \$130,000 in scholarships is awarded to deserving high school students.

Marching for Unity

During its weeklong conference, the sorority held a unity march which included members from each of the nine African-American fraternities and sororities. The groups met at the [National Council of Negro Women](#) building on Pennsylvania Ave. and marched together to the Capitol. Officials estimated there were some 30,000 people at the march.

Even though the organization is non-partisan, AKA members of the House of Representatives spoke at the event. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas, and Diane E. Watson, D-Calif., each addressed the crowd. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi also spoke, along with Majority Whip James Clyburn who is a member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity.

In 2002, First Lady Laura Bush helped launch a reading initiative during the organization's conference. Michelle Obama, wife of Presidential nominee Barack Obama, has also accepted an invitation to join the sorority.

"We come with a purpose," AKA president Barbara McKenzie told the group. "We are leaders in our chosen fields.... who want to add to the quality of life for others."

That purpose is making sure that all the predominately black organizations work together toward their goals, despite the often friendly competition between groups.

"My roommate was a Delta," said Sharon Russell-Hunt of Hampton, Va. She has been a member of the sorority for 36 years.

"But there's so much more we can do if we come together. We can hold bigger and better programs."

Paving the Way

The march was particularly meaningful for Madeline Wyche Coleman, EdS. Coleman, a 50 year member of AKA, was a part of the first group of 500 black students to integrate Michigan State University in 1956.

"Only six of us graduated from that class," Coleman said. "We were called nasty words by the students and we weren't given any support. Our counselors didn't counsel us. No one told us what was required to graduate."

But she found support from her sorority sisters.

"There were six of us on campus, and we were very close," Coleman said.

Younger members of the organization are very grateful for those who came before them. Coleman's daughter, for example, is also an AKA who joined the sorority at Howard University.

Looking Toward the Future

Unlike predominately white fraternities and sororities, those who join a predominately black sorority or fraternity work hard to remain active throughout adulthood. In fact, several women between the ages of 98-108 who were initiated into AKA in the 1930s attended the weeklong conference.

While many undergraduate members admit having fun participating in [step shows](#) and hanging out with their sisters, they each look forward to ensuring that AKA is able to celebrate another 100 years.

"We are excited to help uphold the founding principles," said DerShawn Jefferson, sociology major at Old Dominion University.

Older, more seasoned members agree.

"Meeting up with old friends and connecting with perfect strangers who smile and say 'hi,' it's all so beautiful," said New Yorker Vivian Lenon, who was initiated in 1954. "I have faith that we're going in the right direction."

Robin Mazyck has been a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority since 1992.