

## Black sorority turns 100 with pride, style

July 13, 2008 | By Lolly Bowean, Tribune reporter

Alfreda Keith Keller wasn't planning to travel to Washington, D.C., this week to celebrate the centennial of her sorority.

But when her sorority sisters heard she was skipping the pilgrimage for financial reasons, they told her to pack her bags -- her arrangements had been paid for. Such is the way for the women of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the country's first sorority founded by and for black women.

AKA women pride themselves on taking care of one another and their community, Keller said. When she got into a bind, her "sisters" had her back, the beaming Park Forest woman said. "They said, 'You need to be there with the rest of us.' They didn't even tell me how it happened," Keller said.

The sisters also take pride in how they carry themselves. And Keller was ready to roll, which for any self-respecting AKA woman means perfectly styled hair, a wardrobe heavy on salmon pink and apple green, and pearls -- definitely pearls.

Keller was among hundreds of women from the Chicago region traveling this week to the group's birthplace to honor the past, chart the future, party a little and even witness the rollout of a new Barbie doll designed in their honor.

"People come from all over the world," she said. "Everyone has a story to tell. For us to turn 100 years old, we had to have every 't' crossed and every 'i' dotted.

"We're very organized; we put in a lot of work to make this organization what it is." Alpha Kappa Alpha was founded by nine women at Howard University at a time when few African-American women had access to a college education, and mainstream Greek organizations didn't admit blacks. The founders envisioned a sisterhood pushing each other to achieve academically but also devoted to service projects to uplift the black community.

"The longevity of the organization is a reason to celebrate," said author Gregory S. Parks, who has written two books about the history of black Greek organizations and the challenges they face. "But more than that, you have to look at the work of these women over the past 100 years. The [founders] created something that had never existed in the black community."

### Exclusivity criticized

Though Chicago-based AKA touts its history of service, the group also is criticized as divisive and exclusive because only college-educated women are allowed and they undergo an intense screening process and pay what some deem pricey fees. Recently, sororities and fraternities gained national attention because of hazing and violent rituals that some people endure to become a part of the groups.

AKA formed in a climate where only the most privileged were gathered.

"You had people who were the upper crust of black society, and they liked being the upper crust," Parks said. "But there was a notion of lifting as we climb, and not forgetting where they came from, and who they had an obligation to."

The women of AKA don't claim to be entirely about community service and accomplishment. And when they party, it can be with a certain flair. They revel in the reputation of being conceited pretty girls -- "not conceited but convinced," as one member put it. When gathered in public, they'll strut as they walk -- moving slowly, posing, dipping their shoulders to the back. They might showily check their image in hand mirrors and fluff and fix their hair. And they hold true to their tradition of wearing pearls.

They claim each other as sisters, but they compete to see who is doing the most community service projects, hosting the grandest fundraisers and giving out the most scholarship money. They show off scrapbooks and strive to have the most unique accessories that highlight the sorority's letters, symbols and colors.

### **Past, present, future**

At their private conference, most of the time will be spent charting strategies on how to pool their talents and address educational, health and economic disparities in the black community. But they also will sing their sorority song, share plans for projects and decide how to attract members who will work to keep the organization thriving. And they will have a ceremony honoring members who have died.

True to their stylish reputation, the women will unveil a Barbie doll designed just for them. The doll is outfitted in an evening gown with jeweled shoes.

Lillie Lacey was well into her career in the banking industry in 1996 when she decided to join the organization. She was encouraged to pledge by her sister, who had been an active member since she was in college. As she did her research, Lacey said, she felt a kinship with the women who started the organization -- like they had overcome many of the same obstacles.

"At many points in my career, I was the first and only black woman in my position," she said. "I had stress to deal with. Back in the day, these women chose to stand up, despite obstacles and opposition. They didn't lay down. Just like them, I'm a person who won't let defeat slap me in the face."

Polly Swopes became enchanted with the sorority in the 1970s as a student at Northern Illinois University.

"I was impressed. They carried themselves like such ladies," she said.

She's still active. At the front entrance of her South Holland home, there's a pink-and-green sign to let visitors know that both she and her daughter are proud members of the organization. Days before she was scheduled to leave for Washington, she had picked out which AKA tote bags she would carry and which shirts she would wear.

"I've been planning to go for 36 years," she said.

-----