



Leading Black Sorority Celebrates 100 Years

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Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (AKA), Inc., the oldest Greek-letter black sorority, celebrates its centennial this year. Barbara McKinzie, the group's international president, is joined by sorority member Aundrea Mial, to discuss the group's 100 years of sisterhood and public service. The two also respond to those who argue that groups like AKA are elitist.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

I'm Michel Martin, and this is Tell Me More from NPR News. Today we celebrate a birthday, not of a person but an organization. Alpha Kappa Alpha, or AKA, is the country's oldest African-American Greek-letter sorority. The organization was founded in January 1908. That's when a young woman named Ethel Hedgeman gathered 15 of her classmates and friends at Howard University's campus here in Washington to form an association of women students.

At first, the group's purpose was to offer mutual support to those student members. But now, the group reaches far beyond that one campus with efforts to address issues important to young women and girls across the country and around the world. This week AKA members are gathering here in Washington to celebrate their 100th anniversary.

Joining me in the studio to talk about the organization's legacy and future is Barbara McKinzie. She is international president of the organization. Also with us is Andrea Mial. She's a member of AKA's chapter in Okinawa, Japan. Thank you both for coming and congratulations.

Ms. BARBARA MCKINZIE (Alpha Kappa Alpha International President): Thank you.

MARTIN: I want to start by saying that Greek-letter organizations play a very big role in the lives of many students at some campuses, at HBCUs and others. But some people know very little about them. So I wanted to start by asking each of you why you wanted to join and what it means to you to be a member of AKA. Barbara?

Ms. MCKINZIE: I think the first context is that we have to view the predominantly African-American fraternal organizations, and there are nine of us, no different than we view any other institution in our African-American communities. They were designed at the turn of the century, which is when we began to form, that one generation from slavery, most African-Americans from this country were not going to college. In fact, very few Americans were going to college. And so in concert with what was expected of them, these privileged students expected to not only educate themselves, but uplift the community.

MARTIN: So why did you want to join? What does it mean to you?

Ms. MCKINZIE: Alpha Kappa Alpha for me, and I joined in college as an undergraduate. In fact, I was a freshman when I became a member of this organization. It always represented the opportunity to join what I have always been taught was a common good. Life is about, as I've been taught and one value I hold dearly, life is about giving as you receive. And Alpha Kappa Alpha is a vessel by which I can do that.

MARTIN: Andrea, what about you? What does it mean to you to belong to AKA, and why did you want to join?

Ms. ANDREA MIAL (Member, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Okinawa Chapter): Well, my beginnings with Alpha Kappa Alpha started with role models, my grandmother and my mother. So there's three generations of Alpha Kappa Alpha women within my family. Growing up, they were role models to me and through my observations and through those that were also members of their various chapters, who also adopted me and mentored me as I was growing up to be a young woman, just allowed me to see what being a woman, an African-American woman, living in this time could be and how they can influence the community, a very diverse community, myself coming originally from Hawaii and seeing that there's many people that have needs.

MARTIN: Ms. McKinzie, you pointed out that at that time this organization was founded and the others that followed afterwards, that circumstances for African-Americans is very different in this country. How do you think the organization's mission has changed over the years, if indeed it has changed over the years?

Ms. MCKINZIE: I don't think it has, because even today, a hundred years later, we still have African-Americans who have not fully participated in this freedom as it were in America, the greatest country on earth. So in that context, our mission hasn't changed. I think that to hold steadfast to that mission for 10 decades, five generations, is a testament to the relevance of the mission today.

What we know is that the challenge probably is even greater because no longer are we bound by the shores of America, but we live in a global society. So our work is certainly not done.

MARTIN: Andrea, I wanted to ask, how does the organization function overseas? I think that - you think of the sorority as being so rooted in the African-American experience. Living overseas, how does it work overseas?

Ms. MIAL: The organization is in nine other countries - Japan, Germany, Korea, just to mention a few of them, and the Caribbean. I can't leave that out. But in each of those environments, we have civilians and military personnel who are serving their country. And with that, there is a need to mentor women, to inspire our young men, and that need is there. And it just so happens that we have members who travel either in uniform or in other capacities, like myself as a civilian living overseas, and being able to support the organization and to continue its mission. Barbara had mentioned it being very global, how wonderful for us to be able to take our organization to places like Japan.

MARTIN: Barbara, talk to me about that. What do you think that you get from being in a sorority that you don't necessarily experience in other service organizations? Because there are other groups that do good work, you know. What do you think you get from a sorority experience that's special, that's distinct?

Ms. MCKINZIE: Well, I think what makes us different is very simply we are family by choice, not by purpose, but by choice. And it's a connection that we all get and we are committed to for life. It certainly is embedded under the foundation of faith and hope and love, which are values that are very much Christian values. But all of us are not Christian, so I don't want to try and say that. But what we are humanists, and that is that we stand for all humans to develop to their full potential. Our focus happens to be in particular on women.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, you're listening to Tell Me More from NPR News. We're speaking with Barbara McKinzie and Andrea Mial about the centennial of the oldest African-American Greek letter sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. Ms. McKinzie, you were saying that the - every president comes up with a theme. You titled yours "The Heart of ESP: An Extraordinary Service Program," ESP being an acronym for Economic Sisterhood Partnerships. Why did you choose this theme?

Ms. MCKINZIE: I chose them because at the core of this theme for me in this centennial year, it became very important for every single member to participate. So ESP also means Every Soror, which is a Greek word for sister, Participates. Economics and entrepreneurship is the theme of the day. It is certainly something that helps connect us in a global universe. The S is service, but it also stands for sisterhood. And the P is for partnerships.

So you must be strategic in who you align your values with and your mission with so that through partnerships, we're able to do a much better job. And as an institution of 100 years, we know that through a network of 1,000 chapters that are all over the world.

MARTIN: What are some of the activities, though, that your members are involved in? Andrea, do you want to tell me a story about some of the kinds of activities you guys get involved in overseas in your chapter?

Ms. MIAL: Surely. We will adopt or mentor students, usually in the middle school and high school, and teach them how to be good stewards with their money. How you can grow money. How you can take that allowance and make it grow and what it can look like in the future. Then moving a little bit further, we have health things that need to be discussed. So we bring our families and our communities in to talk about some of the issues that are prevalent in that particular community, whether it be diabetes or it be premarital sex, and to really start to prime the group to be able to talk freely about some of these things so that they are aware of what's happening around them, not only personally but also on a broader scale.

MARTIN: I wanted to talk about the diversity of the membership. Are there non-black members?

Ms. MCKINZIE: Absolutely. Have always been since we were founded.

MARTIN: Why do you think most people - I don't know if people know that. Why do you think people don't know that, and is that - is that ever challenging for the members given the particular history that African-Americans have in this country?

Ms. MCKINZIE: We've always been a diverse membership. Our first honorary member was Jane Adams, who was a white woman in Chicago in the early 20th century. One of our probably most noted honorary members too, who happened to be white, was first lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the '40s. We relate to people as humans based on values. Alpha Kappa Alpha is no different than other institutions. We were born out of the need of having our race improve itself and creating a sanctuary for that race to do that.

In this case, it was African-American college-trained women. But nowhere in that did we do it because we wanted to be exclusive.

MARTIN: Andrea, do you want to comment on that?

Ms. MIAL: Well, I just think based on myself, and that's all I can speak from, is that people tend to look at the world, look at what they're surrounding, and they're drawn to that which best suits where they're headed in life, and what they're interested in, or what they're interested in becoming, and those that are and find Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated in alignment with what they do, regardless of skin color, come.

MARTIN: Speaking of skin color, I think this is the kind of issue that surfaced in some black movies, for example, over the years. You know what I mean, some sort of the popular culture over the years. On the one hand, people think of the Greek letter sororities being a very important source of support for students and then even after, as they make their way through the professional world. On the other hand, some have, in the past at least, experienced these groups as elitist and sort of exclusionary. Can you speak to that? Do you still get that? Do people still ask you about that? Have you ever experienced that, and what do you say to them?

Ms. MCKINZIE: Each of us are the product of our experiences. It's more about what you are becoming than it is about where you've come from. So I'm not saying it doesn't exist. I also would tend to think that if you were to look at any of the organizations and their history and you looked to see, well, where did people come from in this country? And you deal with slavery and everything else, you could get into the whole complexion issue and have your answer. I think that's much more a reality check than it is an elitist statement.

MARTIN: Was there a paper bag test?

MS. MIAL: What, Alpha Kappa Alpha?

MARTIN: Yeah.

Ms. MIAL: Absolutely not. I mean have you taken a look at some of our members? Then, I guess I'd ask you the question. Did they pass a paper bag test?

MARTIN: But that's now, though. Back in the day...

Ms. MCKINZIE: Now, we've got members of that same complexion that have been members for 50 years.

Ms. MIAL: That's my grandmother.

MARTIN: Really?

Ms. MIAL: Would be an example, absolutely.

Ms. MCKINZIE: What I will say, if there was a bias, it was on intelligence. They sought the best.

MARTIN: Best students?

Ms. MCKINZIE: They looked for those that were looking to become something great in order to uplift a race, because they did not - you would not find across any chapters, members who had under B averages of scholastic achievement from the beginning. Our founders were 16 women who went to Howard as undergraduates. However, nine of them left Howard and went to Columbia in New York for graduate work in the early 1900s. No one got in Columbia being a mediocre student. So that was the issue.

But if you take a look at our founders, they range the hue of complexion from white to very dark. And our first president was a lady who had come from a state - she was an orphan. She had no parents. But it was her intellect and her tennis skills that got her a scholarship at Howard. But she became the first president, and she was not someone that I would say passed a paper bag test.

MARTIN: Nellie Quander?

Ms. MCKINZIE: No.

MARTIN: What was her - the first president?

Ms. MCKINZIE: Lucy Slowe.

MARTIN: Lucy Snow?

Ms. MCKINZIE: Slowe was our first president. Nellie Quander was our first national president. She was a lady that went back to Howard when there was another group that was looking to change the mission and purpose about five years after the organization was founded. And so, she was the catalyst that actually created the national institution. See until 1913, Alpha Kappa Alpha was just a little chapter on Howard's campus. And in 1913, we were incorporated to be a national body and grow, and Nellie Quander was the visionary for that.

MARTIN: You've devoted a lot of your time to the organization over the years, I mean, a tremendous amount of time since college, to the organization. Why do you think it means so much to you?

Ms. MCKINZIE: Because of the fruits of its labors. I don't know all the children that we've touched. I don't need to know them. I don't know all the lives we've saved. Don't need to know that, either. Just need to know that we do. And when I think of 200,000 women in 975 chapters around the globe who are that committed to do that, then it makes me know that this world is a better place and that this institution I cherish had something to do with it.

MARTIN: Andrea, do you - you're a what, third generation Alpha Kappa Alpha?

Ms. MIAL: Yes.

MARTIN: Do you have a daughter?

Ms. MIAL: No. Not yet.

MARTIN: Not yet? Will she be allowed to come home if perhaps she pledges Delta or - for example?

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. MIAL: I just don't know that that would happen, and it wouldn't be something that necessarily I would discourage by any means.

(Soundbite of laughter)

MARTIN: But you know the chapter has a strict policy against hazing and physical intimidation. I have to emphasize that.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. MIAL: It wouldn't be something that I would discourage, but I just believe that she would be drawn to the organization. And if she did not become a member, that she would certainly have a heart for the organization.

MARTIN: And, Ms. McKinzie, the - I don't know if it's a special honor for you to be president during the organization's centennial. A hundred years of history behind you, what do you hope for? What do you envision for the next 100 years?

Ms. MIAL: It's an honor. It's a privilege. It's a humbling experience, and it is at times an overwhelming challenge. But what you hope for is no different than what has happened. What could you hope for? That the diversity that has always been with our institution remain a viable part - which it will, but I say remain in the context of it growing. Because if you look around the world, you will find a great diversity among women as to in other countries where these women need to be empowered and need to experience and understand life and quality of life as we do here.

And if we do that, those women are not going to look like the African-American women we've had for this first 100 years. They're going to look very different. At the same time, we haven't

solved all our problems here, either. And so, we cannot abandon it as if we've reached 100 years of success and so all is well, because all is not well. And so, it's now being able to do this in a major way on more than one front, so to speak.

MARTIN: Barbara McKinzie is the international president of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated. We were also joined by Andrea Mial. She is a member of AKA's chapter in Okinawa, Japan. I thank you both so much for joining us. Congratulations, and have a wonderful convention.

Ms. MIAL: Thank you so very much, Michel.

Ms. MCKINZIE: Thank you for having us, Michel. Yes.

MARTIN: Remember, with Tell Me More the conversation never ends. Earlier, I asked my two guests what they got from their sorority experience that they would not have gotten in any other service organization, and now I want to ask you. Are you a member of a Greek letter fraternity or a sorority? Or do you belong to a different type of public service organization? A church, a neighborhood group? Do you believe these groups perform a vital public service? Do you need to belong to a group to help you give back to your community? To tell us more about what you're doing and to read about how other listeners are making a difference, please go to the Tell Me More webpage at npr.org, and blog it out. You can also call our comment line at 202-842-3522. That number again, 202-842-3522.

And that's our program for today. I'm Michel Martin, and this is Tell Me More from NPR News. Let's talk more tomorrow.

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