

Oldest black sorority marks centennial amid continued need for change

By DeWayne Wickham

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LOS ANGELES —

Two days before Erica Evans was to join 25,000 other black women to celebrate the successes of this nation's oldest black sorority, she sat down with 16 young black men trying to understand the problems that have made them an endangered species.

The encounter took place at the University of Southern California, where Evans, a 21-year-old political science major at the University of Pennsylvania, was conducting a roundtable discussion on the experience of being young and black in the United States.

The young men, 17 to 24, were a cross section of black males from this city, which — like many other urban centers — has a disproportionate number of young black men locked into its underclass.

Black men have faced a unique set of troubles for nearly as long as Evans' sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, has existed.

Some are rooted in the long and tortuous history of the deprivations that slavery and the ensuing Jim Crow century imposed on black men. Some of it has to do with the personal failings of black men who live much of their lives in the clutches of the criminal justice system. None of it is easy to explain, though many have tried.

Around the time Alpha Kappa Alpha was founded in 1908, the black sociologist W.E.B. DuBois studied this problem during a series of annual conferences he held in Atlanta. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, peeled back some of the layers with his highly regarded tome on race relations, "An American Dilemma."

Evans' roundtable discussion lacked the grand intentions of those efforts. She is one of a small group of young black women (two from Penn and two from North Carolina A&T State University) who have conducted these sessions with young black men in cities across this nation.

Their work is more personal than clinical. They ask unfiltered questions — questions about the young men's behavior, family values and relationships with the women in their lives — that evoke surprisingly chilling, honest answers.

Erica is especially good at this task. She sees her interviewing work as an outgrowth of her membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha, which celebrates its centennial July 11-18 in Washington.

“One of our goals is to reach out to the black family,” she said. “And to do that, we have to focus on the black male, because for every woman there should be a (successful) man.”

It’s easy for big organizations like Alpha Kappa Alpha, which has more than 200,000 members in 975 chapters around the world, to lose sight of their separate parts. When Evans gets to Washington, she’ll no doubt be just one of the many thousands of junior members of the sorority who will follow in the wake of better-known members.

That’s understandable. The sorority counts among its members poet Maya Angelou, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, astronaut Mae Jemison, former tennis star Zena Garrison, actresses Phylicia Rashad and Lynn Whitfield, and Alicia Keys, the Grammy Award winning songwriter and singer.

But thanks to people like Evans — young black women with an unflinching commitment to its mission — AKA has grown from an idea hatched by nine Howard University students a century ago to the vital force it is today in black America.

Much is said these days about the problems that afflict black America, but not enough is said about the work that groups like Alpha Kappa Alpha do — and inspire their members to do.

For its 100th anniversary, the Mattel Company is producing a limited edition black Barbie doll for the sorority, outfitted in a pink and green evening gown, the group’s colors.

But the organization would be better served by the telling of Evan’s story and the stories of other Alpha Kappa Alpha members who have taken to heart the sorority’s centennial-celebration call for its members to show a “commitment to leadership.”

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