

Sigma Gamma Rho stresses quality over quantity

Black sorority contributes highly to area community despite small membership

Renee B. Jackson
Contributor

While you probably know some Deltas and Alpha Kappa Alphas, the two best-known African American sororities, have you ever met a sister from any of the other black sororities?

One of those sororities has been working quietly for 74 years, acquiring 72,000 members around the United States, the Caribbean and other parts of the world. It was founded by seven young teachers at Butler University in Indianapolis, Ind., and has expanded, today, to 400 chapters.

The name is Sigma Gamma Rho, and if you haven't heard about these ladies, it's time that you get to know them.

The sisters of Sigma observed their Founder's Day Weekend last November, as they do every year, to commemorate the date their organization was founded - Nov. 12, 1922. The year, Lambda Alpha Chapter at Millersville University celebrated their weekend with their support graduate chapter of Baltimore County, and the undergraduate chapter of University of Maryland, Eastern Shore.

Wearing their blue and gold sorority colors, 21 sisters came together at Millersville campus to induct new members, conduct work-

shops, and to share other activities.

"I think Founder's Day week is a time of reflection, to remember our seven founders and to help promote Sigma Gamma Rho," said Jeanette Gossett of the graduate chapter.

During a Saturday afternoon discussion, the sisters talked about Sigma, sharing their pride in their organization, thoughtfully telling the story of their goals, interests and concerns. The meeting room took on an atmosphere of serious purpose, combined with a strong bond of caring and support among the women.

Laughter filled the room at times, too, as the conversation shifted from chapter to chapter, person to person.

Charmaine Williams, a criminal justice major at University of Maryland, Eastern Shore, talked about why she was attracted to Sigma. "It's just the fact that they're about business," she said. "You can't put us in one general statement." At her campus, Sigma has about 10 active members right now.

But, for the Millersville chapter, support from their sisters is especially important, as right now, they only have three members.

Established in 1988,

the Millersville chapter enjoyed a peak membership of 12 between the years 1988-1990, with gradual losses caused by graduations, Gossett said. But, small numbers do not prevent the three Millersville sisters from sustaining an active, involved chapter on campus, and in the Millersville community.

The three members attempt to recruit new members on an ongoing basis, Alisha Johnson, of the Millersville chapter explained. They do this, for example, by meeting with interested young women to discuss the organization.

Hopkins, also of the Millersville chapter.

Sandre Mitchell, of the graduate chapter, talked about recruitment. "We're basically a community service organization. I guess we recruit by example - by being positive black women. We invite those young ladies who represent those qualities

"We're basically a community service organization. I guess we recruit by example --- by being positive black women. We invite those young ladies who represent those qualities we look for in our organization."

--- Sandre Mitchell
graduate chapter member
Sigma Gamma Rho

This semester, they invited non-members to participate in some of their activities, such as a bake sale they sponsored.

"It's a gradual process. You really feed off the responses. We try to do activities that bring African Americans together on campus since it's a predominantly white campus," said Nicole

we look for in our organization," she added.

The sisters discussed which qualities the sorority seeks in new members, and agreed on quite a few: high moral standards, leadership potential, independence, dedication, responsibility, academic focus, motivation, positivity and productivity. The sorority professes three basic principles: "Sisterhood, Scholarship and Service," and its members practice these principles with serious action.

Academic excellence is Sigma's most essential priority, a tradition established by the founders. When those young teachers established their organization in the 1920s, they did so with a mission of helping to shape responsible and productive citizens through the benefits gained by education. Today, the sorority awards annual scholarships to students.

In 1984, Sigma established the National Education Fund to make certain that support is always available for its educational commitment, and for research in education, health and related fields.

Although Millersville's chapter is made up of just three members - Tamiko Barber, an early childhood education major; Alisha Johnson, who is a psychology major; and Nicole Hopkins, a Spanish major, the chapter earned recognition from the university administration last year as the black Greek-letter campus organization with the highest collective grade-point average.

Service beyond the campus is also a priority with the Sigmas, as expressed in their motto, "Greater Service, Greater Progress." The Sigmas work at the local, national and international levels on service projects that have been a strong part of their history. The sorority's numerous national projects include: undergraduate tutoring programs; the Gift of Life Membership Club, which provides resources for the Judie Davis Marrow Donor Recruitment Program; and cooperative work with Habitat

for Humanity, International, in building low-income housing around the nation.

The Sigmas are also hard at work on Project Mwanamugimu, an essay contest designed to teach young people about Africa and African culture. They are also involved in Project Africa, a joint effort with Africare, to provide thousands of dollars for the purchase of grain grinders to ease the labor of African women who perform this work.

At the local level, the Sigmas at Millersville are busy as well. "We've been working on community service projects to better ourselves. I'm part of Big Brothers/Big Sisters," Barber said. She is waiting now to be assigned a little sister.

Barber is also active in the Black Greek Council at Millersville, which is comprised of the seven African American sororities and fraternities on campus. Interestingly, like Sigma, each of the other black Greek-letter organizations has eight or less members. The council meets weekly, plans campus events, and participates in programs such as the Lancaster Salvation Army's "Toys For Tots" drive, Barber said.

The Sigmas of Millersville do face one par-

"It's going to be imperative that we become businesses that are patented after the business structure. We can no longer survive on volunteers."

--- Benita Herring
Executive Director
Sigma Gamma Rho

ticular challenge, however, because for now, membership is not growing. Part of the difficulty is due to the low minority population on the campus, Gossett said. The university places its total enrollment figure for Fall 1996 at 7,485 students. Out of that number, there are only about 500 minority students.

Barber, though, does not see the issue of recruitment as a problem. "I would rather have someone come to me and say, 'I'm interested in your organization.' I have people come up to me and say, 'I like the way you, Alisha and Nicole carry yourselves,'" she said.

Barber observed a trend in decreasing membership figures in black Greek-letter organizations in her

travels to other campuses, she said. "This is not just Millersville, it's all over the East Coast," she said. Part of the reason seems to be the stigma of former abusive pledge practices that still haunt Greek-letter organization, despite the fact that they are now illegal, she explained.

Still, Barber is philosophical about membership figures. "I'd rather take in one person than 15 who are going to give me trouble," she said.

Barber talked about the role of a black sorority on a predominantly white campus. "They [black students] know that they can come to us when they see us on campus." Greek organizations have a voice with the administration, she said.

A problem for many African American students at Millersville is the attempt to assimilate into the mainstream campus culture, Barber said. "Sometimes here it's kind of hard because you're not used to seeing so many white faces," she said. Sigma's role is to help encourage black students that they can make it." For two semesters, for example, the sorority gave out excerpts of Nikki Giovanni's "Racism 101," a book designed as a manual for black college students for coping with problems of racism in the college environment, she explained.

Reflection about her sorority experience goes hand-in-hand with all of Barber's hard work and activity as leader of the small chapter. "It's made me express my view more instead of taking the backseat. I think it took the qualities I already had and brought them out more," she said.

As executive director of Sigma's national headquarters in Chicago, Benita Herring provides leadership and administration for all of the Sigma chapters. She has served the sorority in an executive capacity since 1982.

At the national headquarters, Herring's day-to-day responsibilities include supervising member services, which change often, and right now, collecting dues from all chapters and mailing out membership cards. In her role, she oversees the operation of an organization that today has about 7,200 active members, about one-tenth of the total membership since 1922, she said.

Herring looked at the challenges, today, to membership in sororities and fraternities. In 1990, the National

See Sorority pg. 6



The sisters of Sigma Gamma Rho at their Founder's Day weekend last November at Millersville University

photo by Renee B. Jackson

Still I Rise

BY MAYA ANGELOU

JUST LIKE THE MOONS AND THE SUNS

WITH CERTAINTY OF TIDES

JUST LIKE HOPES SPRINGING HIGH

Still I'll rise

OUT OF HUTS OF HISTORY'S SHAME

I rise

I'M A BLACK OCEAN LEAPING AND WIDE

WELLING AND SWELLING I BEAR IN THE TIDE

LEAVING BEHIND NIGHTS OF TERROR AND FEAR

I rise

INTO THE DAYBREAK THAT'S WONDROUSLY CLEAR

I rise

BRINGING THE GIFTS THAT MY ANCESTORS GAVE

I AM THE DREAM AND THE HOPE OF THE SLAVE

I rise

I rise

I rise

THE THEME OF DR. ANGELOU'S POEM MIRRORS OUR OWN. FOR 50 YEARS UNCF COLLEGES HAVE HELPED STUDENTS RISE TO NEW HEIGHTS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND PRODUCTIVE LIVES. NOW YOU CAN RISE TO THE CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT THIS EFFORT. CALL 1-800-332 UNCF.



SUPPORT THE UNITED NEGRO COLLEGE FUND.
A mind is a terrible thing to waste.