PYRAMIDS: Camille Hardiman demonstrates the hand sign of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. to the newest initiates of MU's Epsilon Psi Chapter hours before their 2008 fall probate, or initiation. The Delta hand sign mimics the Greek symbol for Delta, which represents a change.

It's just about stepping, right?

Around the time I was 12 years old, my father took my brother and me into the heart of downtown St. Louis for a Greek show. He told me he wanted to share some of his college experience and cited some similar events that took place at his alma mater, Ole Miss.

At the time, I had no clue what a Greek show was, and I had no intention of going. But my father's excitement immediately influenced my own as we pulled up to the concrete amphitheater. The sun was bright, but not as bright as the glistening gold boots I saw once I stepped out of the car. I thought I had walked into some type of live amateur theater production.
A husky, dark-skinned man introduced the group wearing the “sun” hats and purple T-shirts of the brothers of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Their sadle and young men sitting behind me started barking at performers’ bodies making music and acting as instruments. My brother and I laughed, looked at each other and knew we were in for a treat. I’ve never forgotten that day.

Black Greek Letter Organizations such as Omega Psi Phi are one of black culture’s most organic institutions. The first black intercollegiate fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. was established by a group of men at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in 1906. What started as a way to address the issue of retention among black males in higher education — a problem that still exists today across the U.S. — quickly expanded to include community involvement and service. It also molded most of black culture’s greatest political and social change including the black arts, black power and Civil Rights Movement. The importance of these organizations to their members is the subject of my long-term project produced as a master’s student, “Beyond This Place: Documenting the Visual History of African American Fraternities and Sororities.”

Eight of the Divine Nine organizations, a name used to describe the groups, have an active but small membership at MU. The National Pan-Hellenic Council, which is the umbrella organization for the five fraternities and four sororities, operates through MU’s office of Greek Life. With black student makeup up less than 1 percent of MU’s total enrollment, less than 3 percent of them initiate into one of the eight chapters. New member classes at other campuses such as Howard University have as many as 70 initiates. But whatever their size, these chapters fulfill the original values and goals behind Black Greek Letter Organizations.

At MU, the Black Greek Letter Organizations are social and political networks for students as well as some faculty and staff. For example, the Jerush E. Steilhalden building is named after MU’s first black faculty member to receive tenure track appointment, and he is also a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. As a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, myself, I know that the remnants of past members’ motivations to be part of the Black Greek Letter Organizations are embedded in campus culture, black history and American history. What lies beyond the colorful themes, energy and historical significance of these organizations far outweighs the clap of hands or stomp of feet.

These images, showing brotherhood, sisterhood, service, tribulations and triumph are a snapshot of the black Greek experience at MU. Check out the ceremony at the archive ceremony at the fall 2010 Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. neophyte presentation at 7:30 p.m. on Dec. 3 in MU’s Conservation Auditorium.

And no. It isn’t all about stepping.
The oddly shaped letters proudly worn around campus might perplex those outside the Greek community. But to say, “It’s all Greek to me” would mean ignoring the distinctive identities of MU’s Greek chapters. Greeks share the common values of brotherhood, academic achievement and philanthropy, but key differences set apart the all-black social fraternities, the multiracial Greeks, and the all-female social sororities. Women at MU have experienced an epidemic and experience disproportionate effects of social-economic disparity. In its best form, it would give rise to social triumphs through the black arts, black power and the Civil Rights Movement. One successful institution has begun to adopt the practice.

GRIT: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. member Montel Evans puts on his “grit” during MU’s 2008 Fall Fest. Fall Fest immediately pre-dates homecoming and academic and cultural resources and black student organizations. Although the concept of the grit cannot be traced back to specific origins, it is rumored to have started in the South. The practice is now seen among all Black Greek Letter Organizations as an act of masculinity. Sometimes these have also begun to adopt the practice.

KAPPA KANE: Reginald Wilson, 19, accepts his cane from a prophyte during probate practice in December 2010. There is much speculation as to the origins of the Kappa Kane. It dates back to when exalted Egyptian citizens carried canes as a status symbol. In certain African rights of passage, the cane symbolized manhood and had to be carried by initiates wishing to become adult members of their tribe. The cane has become an icon of the men of Kappa Alpha Psi. Through footsteps, clapping and spoken word, dancers celebrate the culture after emancipation. This original black culture would, in its worst form, fall subject to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and experience disproportionate effects of social-economic disparity. In its best form, it would give rise to social triumphs through the black arts, black power and the Civil Rights Movement. One successful institution is the development of black fraternities and sororities.

SPEAK GREEK
Breaking down similarities and differences among Greek councils nationally and at MU
by ALI STRAKA
The oddly shaped letter Puerto Rico around campus might perplex those outside the Greek community. But to say, “It’s all Greek to me” would mean ignoring the distinctive identities of MU’s Greek chapters. Greeks share the common values of brotherhood, academic achievement and philanthropy, but key differences set apart the all-black social fraternities, the multiracial Greeks, and the all-female social sororities. Women at MU have experienced an epidemic and experience disproportionate effects of social-economic disparity. In its best form, it would give rise to social triumphs through the black arts, black power and the Civil Rights Movement. One successful institution is the development of black fraternities and sororities.

The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961. The council’s presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961.
SERVICE: Ono Ikanone (right), a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., teaches steps during a community service event sponsored by the Sprite Step Off at The Columbia Boys and Girls Club. The club received a surprise when it was given a check for $4,500 from Sprite to help support its programs. Black Greek Letter Organizations value service and, ideally, should strive to uplift their communities. The founders of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. started the Fraternity to address the issue of retention of black men in higher education.

APPRECIATION: Greg Green, one of the newest members of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., gets a hug from his grandmother, Helen Anthony, during his probate in December 2009 in MU’s Conservation Auditorium. Howard University in Washington, D.C., is the birthplace of five of the nine black Greek organizations.

BONDED: Charles Ukatu Jr. mediates while his fraternity brother Donte Howard cuts his hair in December 2009. Brotherhood and sisterhood mean a lot to Black Greek Letter Organizations. The bond between members is strong, and members maintain the brotherhood and sisterhood known as the “hood.” The hood drives networking among organizations and gives people opportunities in business, entrepreneurship and employment. The hood is powerful enough to offer preference in job opportunities. The 1900s saw the development of a more culture-conscious Black community.