



TIES THAT BOND

*An up-close view of the
culture of MU's
black Greek life*

photography and text by JARRAD HENDERSON

→ **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.

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 change.

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A husky, dark-skinned man introduced the group wearing the “sun” boots and purple T-shirts of the brothers of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Then adults 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 students making up less than 7 percent of MU 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 Arvarh E. Strickland 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 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.



PERSEVERANCE: Detrez Woods performs with members of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. during Fall Fest at MU’s Tiger Plaza in September 2009. Although most Black Greek Letter Organizations step with rhythmic combinations of hand and foot movements, the Omegas entertain and hop, a more athletic and high-energy performance, while singing chants and songs.



HOMECOMING: Alpha Kappa Alpha Lauren “Lo” Grant and Alpha Phi Alpha Brian Hamilton won the title of the 2010 Legion of Black Collegian Homecoming King and Queen. The combination of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. is often referred to as the Phrist Phamily of Black Greek Life.



PROBATE: Aisha Barnes waits nervously as her prophete, Brittnay Jewett-Hale, gives last-minute encouragement to her neophytes before the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. probate in January 2009. The probate is a ceremony and celebration in which neophytes are revealed to the community. Many view the practice as a tradition essential to the rite of passage of black Greek initiation.

HISTORY: Members of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. at MU recite Zeta history during their probate in January 2009. Although there are more than 800 chapters across the world, the history and significance of fraternity and sorority life remain the same.



GRIT: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. member Montel Evans puts on his "grit" during MU's 2008 Fall Fest. Fall Fest introduces new students to 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 common among all Black Greek Letter Organizations as an act of masculinity. Sororities have also begun to adopt the practice.



PERFORMANCE: Spectators watch Kendall Dumas and Anthony Martin perform during MU's 2009 Fall Fest activities. Discovering what it means to be African-American is considered organic to the shaping of a new 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 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 friendship, academic achievement and philanthropy, but key differences set apart the all-male social fraternities, the multicultural Greeks, the all-female social sororities and the historically black fraternities and sororities.

THE BASICS OF GREEK LIFE

MU's Office of Greek Life oversees 51 Greek-letter groups that are often local chapters of national organizations. These chapters are divided into four councils, which are the governing bodies of the chapters:

- The Interfraternity Council governs 27 all-male social fraternities.
- The Panhellenic Association includes 14 all-female social sororities.
- The Multicultural Greek Council has two groups that promote cultural awareness.
- The National Pan-Hellenic Council governs the eight historically black fraternities and sororities. Nationally, this council has nine organizations. They're unofficially called the Divine Nine. All nine groups have charters at MU, which means they all once had a presence on campus.

HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL PAN-HELLENIC COUNCIL

The council's presence was established at MU when Kappa Alpha Psi founded its Delta Omega chapter on March 18, 1961.

To become a brother or sister, prospective members go through a selection process known as member intake. Unlike other councils on campus, there's less formality to recruitment. Chapters don't actively seek out members, but instead they let their campus and community work speak for them, says Brian Hamilton, former president of MU's chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha.

National Pan-Hellenic Council chapters are smaller than those in the Interfraternity Council and Panhellenic Association. As of fall 2009, there were 47 members total in the NPHC chapters at MU compared to 2,976 women in Panhellenic sororities and 2,057 men in Interfraternity Council fraternities.

Because of smaller membership, NPHC chapters focus more on community service than hosting annual philanthropy events and raising money like other Greek councils on campus. "We are brothers and sisters bound together by our common goal of uplifting our communities and helping those who can't help themselves," Hamilton says.

Strolling and stepping are traditions unique to the black Greek community. Stepping is a form of dance. Through footsteps, clapping and spoken word, dancers use their bodies to create rhythm and sound. A stroll line is a formation unique to each chapter. These formations are representative of the chapter's family-like bond and are not meant to be broken. "Other organizations and (Greek) councils were so inspired by NPHC that they've taken our traditions and made them their own," Hamilton says.

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.



MORE ONLINE REGINALD WILSON'S PERSONAL QUEST

Reginald Wilson faced tough challenges when his father died from cancer in 2004. "My father was everything to me," Wilson says. "I went through some things." He found some peace in the brotherhood of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Wilson's experiences challenged him to become a better person and man. "I'll never say anything is impossible again," he says.



GO TO VOXMAGAZINE.COM FOR MORE ON WILSON, ADDITIONAL PHOTOS AND STATISTICS AND INFORMATION ABOUT THE DIVINE NINE.



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.

BONDED: Charles Ukato 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.



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.

