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Local chapters lead way with programs to help at-risk youths

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Alpha males, females
Dwight R. Worley
Staff
The Journal News

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Margaret Capers' son is taking his first steps into manhood with the help of Chiku Awali. The Spring Valley cultural group, organized by local members of black fraternities and sororities, teaches children African dance and drums, and holds rites-of-passage ceremonies for young men. The ceremonies - part cultural education, part life skills workshop - are helping Earl Capers, 12, build self-esteem and learn what it means to be a man, his mother said.

"I've seen a lot of growth in him, from the way he speaks to his table manners," said Capers, a teaching assistant at Rockland BOCES in West Nyack. "I wasn't aware of the work that fraternities and sororities are doing in the community. They're doing a lot."

Throughout the Lower Hudson Valley, local chapters of national black fraternities and sororities run after-school and mentoring programs, voter registration drives, health fairs and other community programs. Continuing a century-long tradition of promoting education and empowering the black community through community service, they are among many groups recognized this year by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, which founded Black History Month.

"What fraternities and sororities are about is to be there to give people that helping hand, especially the youth," said Alexandreena Dixon of Suffern, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the first sorority founded by black women, and the founder of Chiku Awali.

Black Greek-letter organizations like Alpha Kappa Alpha, founded in 1908, have their roots in the early 20th century, when blacks faced racial and social barriers on predominantly white college campuses. Usually not afforded the same rights and privileges as white students, blacks were often barred from joining white fraternities and sororities. To foster unity among blacks and help bring about social change, black students formed their own organizations and joined the fight for civil rights and equal education. Sterling Inzar, president of the Rockland chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, said that because most fraternities and sororities required members to be college students or

graduates, their ranks are filled with black professionals and the upper class of the community. Many feel compelled to help those less fortunate as Inzar does through his chapter's mentoring programs for youth who are at risk of dropping out of school.

"Younger members of the chapter go into the schools and try to get inside these young men's heads," said Inzar, whose fraternity is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year since its founding at Cornell University. It is the country's oldest black Greek-letter organization.

Sandra Henry, a nurse in Suffern, said Dixon's rites-of-passage program had helped boost her son Kenneth's confidence and improved his performance in school. Through the year-long program, which helps transition boys into young men, Kenneth, 12, has learned more about his culture, how to speak in public and improved his study habits.

"This is making him a better person, a better big brother, a better man," said Henry, 44. Next to black churches, fraternities and sororities are among the most socially active groups in the black community, said Byron Hurlock of Chestnut Ridge, who belongs to the Rockland chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity.

Through the influence of their members they can mobilize thousands of people for various causes, including blood and tissue donation drives, as chapters of Alpha Phi Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority did in Rockland last year, or the Millions More Movement gathering in Washington in October, he said.

"We act together in order to accomplish certain goals in our community," said Hurlock, 49, who is also president of the National Pan-Hellenic Council of Rockland, an umbrella group for local chapters of historically black Greek-letter organizations.

A primary objective of the organizations is to promote education. Combined, local fraternities and sororities give out tens of thousands of dollars in college scholarships annually. Many sponsor after-school and mentoring programs and take older teenagers on tours of college campuses.

"It's all about how we can elevate our youth through education," said Jasmine Bellamy, 34, president of Alpha Kappa Alpha's Zeta Nu Omega chapter in Mount Vernon. "Everyone who is an AKA is college-educated. We owe a lot of debt for that. It's a part of what we have to do."

The Westchester chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority runs several mentoring programs for teenage girls at area schools. The group will also host Kings of the Kitchen next month, an event for men to showcase their favorite dishes to raise money for Hurricane Katrina victims, said Sharee Stephens, the chapter's president.

Despite such good works by the organizations, negative perceptions of fraternities and sororities persist. Members say most people associate the groups with wild parties and hazing incidents on college campuses, even though most active members are middle-age professionals.

Dennis McGloster, the new president of Omega Psi Phi in Rockland, said he was working to combat the negative reputation of fraternities by encouraging his members to become more active in the community. Too many members, he said, took part only in the chapter's social gatherings and were not fulfilling their community-service obligations.

"There are guys that, if I have a party they'll come out, but if I say let's do something with the kids tomorrow and it won't cost you anything, they won't be anywhere in sight," said McGloster, an accountant who lives in Hillcrest. "We should be doing better."

McGloster said his Xi Lambda Lambda chapter would begin a new series of community initiatives, starting with workshops to teach young people about money and investing.

Wiley Harrison, 50, president of the New Rochelle-White Plains chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi, hopes to make his chapter more active by recruiting new members - a significant change since most fraternities and sororities wait to be approached by prospective members. He said many people didn't know they could join graduate chapters of fraternities and sororities long after they had left college.

"I think the role fraternities and sororities play has been very vital," said Harrison, who lives in Greenburgh.

Reach Dwight R. Worley at dworley@lohud.com or 914-694-3517.