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All About Service by [Kevin P. Henry](#)

The Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has demonstrated a commitment to public service ever since its first members took to the streets as part of the Women's Suffrage March in Washington D.C., in March 1913. Today, that steadfast commitment to community service focuses on programs that promote human welfare and a higher quality of life both locally and across the globe. With a current membership of over 200,000 predominantly African American women, the sorority has over 900 chapters in the United States, Japan, Germany, Bermuda, the Bahamas, Korea and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Over the years, sorority members have included notable women such as Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman to run as a major party candidate for the presidency of the United States; actress Ruby Dee Davis; and Barbara Jordan, the first African American from a southern state to serve in the U.S. congress since 1883.

The Bellevue Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, with 16 charter members, became the 800th chapter of the sorority in 1989.

In its early years, BAC focused on internal development, social interaction and public service. The group initiated a "Women Helping Women" public service project by adopting a Bellevue family, created a chapter newsletter, and established vital links to the African American community, with a special focus on aiding women and youth. For the past 19 years, the sorority has committed to participation in both local and international projects.

The organization's effervescent president, Colleen Williams, commits an average of 10 hours per week to sorority business, which includes leading meetings like the one recently held at the Renton Vocational College, where about 30 women were in attendance. At the meeting, Williams, who also runs her own project management and consulting business, showed members a tableful of gift baskets she had made with themes from African American history and culture. Williams says she has found a way to be entrepreneurial and cultivate an interest in African American history and culture at the same time.

Also on hand was guest Janet Jones-Preston, who enthusiastically motioned women over to see her PowerPoint slide show of the People's School for Positive Education in Ghana, Africa. Her son, Akili Mosi Secka, runs the school with his wife, Lorana (Pree) Secka, who was also present at the meeting.

After a brief prayer, the women, ranging in age from early 20s to mid-60s, listened intently to Secka describe the school that was funded by Preston. Preston's hope is to gather donations to

help pay for expanding the current school and to build another one in the near future. This is just one example of connections the chapter makes to extend its reach across the world.

A visit to Kenya in the summer of 2006 made a lasting impression on Pauline Hill, who chairs the chapter's International Awareness projects. Traveling with 12 other African American educators who visited the country, Hill vividly recalls the disturbing images of "dark and dank shanties lining the countryside in rows, housing up to as many as 10 people," in the slums of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya. She was further moved by her interaction with orphans, many of whom suffered from HIV/AIDS and asthma.

Following that trip, Hill and Regina Morton, who had traveled with her, began a campaign to collect flip-flops for the feet of barefoot Kenyan children. Over six months, the sorority sisters collected 4,000 pairs of flip-flops to send overseas. The organization credits the success of the campaign to invaluable help from the Tacoma Alumnae Chapter; Alaska Alumnae Chapter; sorority sister Robin Green, who collected funds from the Boeing Black Employees Association; and members of First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Seattle.

Hill grew up in the sometimes harsh reality of segregated South Carolina. "That experience has made me appreciate what I have, and helped create my servant's heart. I am a public servant; that is who I am and I am doing God's work," Hill says. "It's not about the name of the sorority, but about the work that we do, work built on Christian principles. I know there is much to do here in America for our people, many of whom are poor, homeless, uneducated and disenfranchised." The urbane Hill, now retired, shows no signs of slowing down, even after spending 40 years in education, capping her career in Seattle as an administrator.

On the domestic front, the sorority links to the local community through the East King County YWCA. A big fan of the sorority is Elizabeth Westburg, East King County regional director for YWCA, Seattle-King County-Snohomish County. Westburg says her connection with the sorority began three years ago. "I am very impressed with Delta Sigma Theta and the work that they do," she says. "The sorority is involved with the YWCA in many ways, including being actively involved in the Welcome Home Program, which means it sponsors one of our apartments that houses homeless families. Their organization provided all the furniture and household items that a family with very few resources needs."

Through Welcome Home, the YWCA helps battle homelessness and promotes self-sufficiency for women and families. The program provides a range of housing options for low income, homeless women and families in Bellevue, Redmond and Issaquah, and provides child care, employment services, individualized support and case management. Last year the program served over 3,000 low-income and homeless people in East King County.

The Deltas also assisted the Adopt-a-Family program, which provides holiday gifts and food to low income and homeless families. And, the sorority donated money and volunteered at the recent Eastside Fall fund-raiser, Chefs' Fest, by serving as chefs' assistants. This year's event served over 350 guests and helped raise money for the YWCA's Family Village.

"Support from Delta Sigma Theta and other community organizations is critical to the work we do at the YWCA," Westburg says. "We couldn't do the work without our community partners. They are dedicated, hardworking, kind and compassionate."

BAC President Williams says of the affiliation, "One of the reasons they were so important for us to partner with is because the YWCA was one of the first organizations in this country to open its doors to African American women." "This was long before the laws of the land required them to do so. One of our sorority's founders, Bertha Pitts Campbell, (June 30, 1889-April 2, 1990), spent 40 years as a volunteer with the YWCA in Seattle. It is very important for us to design projects around the Five-Point Program Thrust set by our national organization: physical and mental health, educational development, economic development, international awareness and involvement, political awareness and involvement."

Williams enjoys delegating leadership and seeing younger members blossom and take over

certain duties, like 24-year-old Donella Pearson, who recently coordinated a health fair and chairs physical and mental health projects for the chapter.

Another young member, Regina Austin, 25, is the recording secretary for the chapter, and sees the group as a vehicle for forming new friendships. "When I moved out here it was hard to meet other professional African Americans," she says, "But this chapter has provided me with valuable social networking opportunities."

Still, Austin is confronted by stereotypes. "Most people don't know that there are sororities and fraternities that have alumnae chapters," she says. "I have to explain to them that membership in my sorority is a lifetime commitment and that our commitment to public service extends beyond our college career. Some other reactions that I get are 'You don't seem like the type that would let someone haze you?' or, 'So you're used to drinking a lot since you're in a sorority!' I have to educate so many people and explain that my sorority is a sisterhood of college-educated black women who are committed to public service and this in no way equates to hazing or binge drinking."

Perhaps BAC president Williams sums up the organization's mission best by saying: "Delta Sigma Theta has always been a public service sorority. We view the Bellevue and surrounding areas as an opportunity for us to expand our commitment to helping build positive images for African Americans while at the same time extending the connection to women and families in other countries such as Africa. You have to have a public-service heart to do the work of Delta; it's hard work that requires a life-time commitment."

For more information on the Bellevue Alumnae Chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, visit <http://www.bellevuealumnae.org/>.

Kevin Henry is a frequent contributor to Seattle Woman.

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