

Latin Greek Organizations Attracting Blacks - Some choose a different path to find a home

By: Topher Sanders

Quashawn Williams knew Omega Psi Phi was the fraternity for him. After all, he had family members who were already a part of the historically black fraternity.

But when Williams, now 26, went to an Omega informational in 1997 at Montclair State University in New Jersey, he didn't like what he was told.

"They told me I had to bring chicken and beer to the interest meeting," he says. That experience made Williams gravitate toward Lambda Theta Phi, a Latino fraternity.

"When I went to the Lambda Theta Phi interest meeting they were like 'just bring yourself, we're providing you with things,'" says Williams, who joined the fraternity in spring of 1998. "That's a big difference."

His decision is becoming more common as an increasing number of black college students are joining historically Latino Greek organizations. An exact number is tough to pinpoint, but Ruby Hernandez Alvarado, chair of the National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations Inc., estimates that blacks now make up about 10% of the membership of Latino fraternities and sororities.

Many Latino Greek organizations were founded by students with ties to countries in Central and South America. The diversity already present within Latin culture makes many Latino Greek organizations interested in multiculturalism, Alvarado says. So it's easy to see how diversity could remain a focal point for many historically Latino groups, she explains. The fact that black students are joining their ranks, Alvarado says, is merely a case of students finding the right connection.

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"I think it's really just them trying to find a group that they are feeling a strong family connection with," says Alvarado.

Once members, some black students find that there's so much diversity in Latin organizations that they easily fit in.

"On my line there was an Egyptian, a Korean, an African American, a brother from Ghana, and four Hispanics," says Williams. "You couldn't even tell it was a Latin fraternity when I was in school. Even the Hispanic brothers were dark, so we were just a bunch of dark-skinned brothers."

Black students with Caribbean roots may feel a particular bond to Latino organizations, Hernandez says.

"A lot of the island countries do have a strong Hispanic or Latino heritage behind them and I think some people are able to see some of their own traditions in those Latino Greek fraternities or sororities," Alvarado says.

Leiaka Welcome, 21, a senior at Midwestern State University, in Wichita Falls, Texas, didn't see her decision to pledge Latin sorority Kappa Delta Chi as an odd choice. Welcome is from Trinidad. Her second language is Spanish.

"The kind of person I've grown up to be, coming from the islands, I've always been exposed to a lot of different cultures. So for me it didn't seem unnatural," she says.

Welcome says she wasn't interested in sorority life until she met the young women who would eventually become her Kappa Delta Chi sisters.

"The reason I got into my sorority is because I met the girls at an interest meeting and they were different in terms of explaining everything and just trying to make you feel welcome," she says.

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Still, the reaction she's gotten from some family members about her choice may be an indication that not everyone has embraced this trend. Some of her cousins are members of traditionally black sororities, including Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta. She says she is often asked about her Greek choice when she visits friends and family.

"When I get back to the East Coast and I'm wearing my Greek letters they say 'So, what sorority are you in?' When I tell them it's Latino-based, they say 'Interesting'," she says with a laugh.

Michael Bowie, national president of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, the organization that represents the nine largest black fraternities and sororities, says he's not surprised that some black students are joining Latino Greek organizations.

"I think as students are beginning to go to different colleges they are realizing that there are more options out there," Bowie says. "Many of the Latino fraternal organizations have opened up their doors and in today's society that (speaks to) multiculturalism and diversity and it's encouraged. In fact, many have looked at our organizations as traditionally African American organizations, but we too have become diverse as well with students who are Latino and Caucasian."

Bowie says he doesn't think Latino fraternities and sororities are more inclusive than black organizations, instead, he says that all of the historically Latino and black Greek organizations have a desire to boost numbers.

"I wouldn't say that Latin organizations are more accepting," he says. "I think every organization is accepting to a degree because everybody wants more brothers."

But Jennifer Kamara had a different experience. Kamara, now 23, pledged Latino sorority Omega Phi Beta at Cornell University in the spring of 2004. She says she found her sisters more open than those who belonged to black Greek organizations.

"The other Greeks weren't really very open, it was more like you had to know someone to even find out when the informational was," says Kamara whose father is from Sierra Leone and her mother is from Nigeria.

Kamara says she decided to pledge Omega Phi Beta because of the group's commitment to learning about culture.

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"I really wanted an organization that was focused on culture and learning about your roots," she says. "And I started doing my research and found the Website for Omega Phi Beta and thought they had a real dedication to learning about where you come from and appreciating all cultures."

When choosing a fraternity or sorority, race shouldn't be a consideration, Welcome says.

"I never thought of it as being a black person in a Latino organization," she says. "I just thought of it as being in a group with nine other really great girls. We all just look at each other as sisters