

Black, Deaf, and Greek
Conversations with Deaf Members of “The Divine Nine”

By

Ernest E. Garrett III
&
M. Keith Island, as Guest Interviewer

Black, Deaf, and Greek...



Ernest E. Garrett III, Member (2001-present)

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

This interview was developed in partnership with **Bro. M. Keith Island**, an alumnus of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and who is currently the coordinator of interpreting services for the U.S. Department of Transportation. Keith is a qualified and skilled sign language interpreter, as well as an actor and playwright. A fall '99 initiate of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Keith, along with several other brothers, is credited with bringing into the chapter its first deaf initiate, **Bro. Ernest E. Garrett III**. He also served as the designated interpreter for all fraternity functions from 1999-2002.



Bro. M. Keith Island, Guest Interviewer – “The Interpreter: Hands of Gold”

For more information about Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, please go to the following link: <http://www.alphaphialpha.net/>

KEITH: What is your hearing status? For example, do you identify yourself as Deaf/deaf/hard-of-hearing, or both?

ERNEST: Hey frat. I would say that I am deaf without my hearing aids on, but with my hearing aids on, I function as a hard of hearing person.

KEITH: What Black Greek letter organization did you decide to become a member of?

ERNEST: I am privileged to be a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. I officially joined the ranks of this organization on the evening of Friday, April 27, 2001, along with five other line brothers: Four chapter line brothers, including myself, and 2 line brothers from Beta Chi chapter at Philander Smith College, a historically black college in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Black Greek life is an intimate part of my family history. On my mother's side of the family, I have cousins who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and cousins who are members of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. There is also a cousin who is a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. On my father's side of the

family, there is a cousin who is a member of my favorite sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and several aunts (my paternal grandmother's sisters) who are members of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. Last but not least, I have one cousin, a Ph.D., who is a brother of the "Black and Old Gold," Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

KEITH: Why did you choose membership in this organization?

ERNEST: I became a member of Alpha for several reasons. As a student at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), I was well aware that the Alphas had a conspicuous presence on my campus and I was quite impressed with how the brothers seemed to get along with one another and generated such positive energy for the campus community. From their strategically choreographed step rhythms during highly-acclaimed Greek shows, to the leadership of individual members within other organizations at UALR, I knew early on that the Alphas were young men of distinction who were highly intelligent, highly motivated, and highly consistent in their ability to deliver on the stage and in the meeting rooms, in essence, wherever they went. In addition, the organization's reputation, since its inception in 1906, never ceases to amaze me. Many prominent men in the African-American community are members of this fraternity and to be connected with great men of not only African-American history in particular, but American history in general, was an honor that I simply could not pass up. The service of my chapter brothers in their community has been marked, I believe, with unparalleled excellence. We registered people to vote in the Little Rock Community, adopted a highway and regularly cleaned it up, mentored children and youth in local school districts, hosted panels and workshops for the campus community, and other activities too numerous to mention. For me personally, what made these events "different" in comparison with other Black Greek organizations was the brothers themselves. Prior to my affiliation with Alpha, I had no brothers to call my own. I am the oldest child of my parents and I have two younger sisters. Alpha gave me a sense of brotherhood that I had not enjoyed previously and for which I am grateful to this day.



Photo retrieved from: <http://nativenotes.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/nphc-new.jpg>



Clockwise from left: Kappa Psi Chapter brothers: Idorenyin Uto-Uko, Chris Phillips, and Brian Banks

KEITH: Did you have a problem communicating with other members during the intake process? If so, how did you resolve these issues?

ERNEST: *chuckling* Now frat, you know that communication was not a problem for me. The reason for this is because I was fortunate to join the fraternity during a time when one of my “big brothers” also happened to be the only certified sign language interpreter in the state of Arkansas. His name is M. Keith Island, also known as “The Interpreter: Hands of Gold.” He was a member of my chapter and my designated interpreter throughout the process of my initiation into the fraternity. What is more, UALR recognizes American Sign Language as a foreign language and so many of my fraternity brothers took ASL 1, 2, and even 3 prior to the time that I decided to go through the membership process in Alpha. To make a long story short, all of my chapter brothers knew how to communicate with me and they knew that I could read lips and that they needed to face me when talking with me. For those who did not know, I had no problem advocating for myself and reminding them of my communication needs. As for my line brothers, they always had my back and made sure that I was able to understand them and were very patient when I asked them to repeat something they were saying.

KEITH: Did your chapter fraternity members know sign language? Are they familiar with deaf culture?

ERNEST: Yes, my chapter members knew sign language and were quite familiar with deaf culture. UALR had a highly visible Interpreter Education Program during

the time that I was a college student there (and most likely still does). I can honestly say that I am thankful that my chapter brothers were open-minded enough to actually take an ASL class and to not be ashamed to use the language for communicating with me as needed.

KEITH: Why did you choose not to seek membership in a deaf fraternity?

ERNEST: That is an easy enough question to answer. The option to join a deaf fraternity was simply not there at UALR. Since my matriculation as a graduate student at Gallaudet University – where deaf fraternities and sororities are the rule rather than the exception - I have sometimes wondered if I would have made a different choice had a deaf fraternity been available at UALR. I am aware that at Gallaudet University, there was a Black Deaf fraternity. Zeta Sigma Psi Fraternity is the first Black Deaf Greek Fraternity in deaf history and I know quite a few of their members. As a matter of fact, one of my fraternity brothers served as an advisor to the fraternity. I can honestly say, however, that for me, there is no other fraternity choice except for Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.



Ernest (second from right) posing with chapter brothers and Miss Black & Gold Queen (center)

KEITH: What advice do you have for other deaf/hard of hearing persons who may decide to join a hearing fraternity or sorority in the future?

ERNEST: Great question, frat. When a prospect approaches me about becoming a member of my fraternity, I usually ask him “why?” One of the first things that I believe aspirants should be able to do on demand is to express the reasons behind their interest in a given fraternity or sorority. I would also encourage an aspirant to

do some research about not only the particular fraternity in which he may be interested (or sorority), but to also read about the other organizations that also exist as a basis for comparing and contrasting what the strengths and weaknesses are. In this way, an aspirant can make an informed decision.

KEITH: Does becoming a member of a hearing fraternity or sorority require that you lose your identity as a deaf person? In other words, do deaf persons perceive you as a "sell out?"

ERNEST: I have not had any problems with deaf people calling me a "sell out" due to my choice of fraternity. By the time I arrived to Gallaudet University, I had moved beyond the college frat boy ideal and had advanced to not only graduate studies, but alumni membership in a District of Columbia chapter of my fraternity (Omicron Lambda Lambda). In other words, I was not in a position to socialize with those who may be critical of my choice of fraternity. At the very minimum, I received perplexed stares when I wore my fraternity jacket on the campus of Gallaudet University because obviously, the Greek letters on my jacket were distinctly different from that of other Greek fraternities and sororities on the campus. Of course if anyone approached me about my experience with joining a fraternity, I was more than happy to engage in a friendly discussion. Throughout my experience as an initiate of my fraternity, my identity as a deaf person has remained intact. The only thing that changed was my commitment to others besides myself. I now had brothers I cared for and who cared for me and we looked out for each other, supported each other academically, made a positive difference in the campus community. Notwithstanding our differences as individuals, when we got together as a group, we were one and this showed in everything that we did.

KEITH: Are you affiliated with an alumni chapter of your fraternity?

ERNEST: Yes. When I graduated from UALR in 2003, I moved to Washington, D.C. and eventually affiliated with the Omicron Lambda Alpha chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha from 2004-2006. Once again, I was fortunate to have a qualified and skilled interpreter - and my former "Big Brother" - M. Keith Island on hand during chapter meetings. The last time I saw many of these alumni chapter brothers was during our fraternity's national centennial celebration in 2006. I also ran into several former Kappa Psi Chapter brothers! Currently, I am affiliated with the Lambda Alpha Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, though I have yet to attend a meeting or otherwise become involved in chapter activities. I suppose I should say that my affiliation is purely financial in that I only pay dues at this time, but due to communication needs, have not been able to involve myself completely.



Ernest Garrett's Big Brother and Interpreter, M. Keith Island; member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority

KEITH: What, in your opinion, can you and your organization do at both the chapter and national level in order to increase access for its deaf and hard of hearing members?

ERNEST: It would be easy to surmise that encouraging more deaf and hard of hearing to become involved so that awareness will increase is the answer. Based on my experience in the organization, I think that this approach is not practical. It is not an easy task to find deaf and hard of hearing aspirants for my fraternity. The organization is pretty selective and if you are a deaf or hard of hearing aspirant, it will require more than a chapter who understands ASL and deaf culture in order to secure membership. Your grade point average matters. Your commitment to manly deeds, scholarship, and love for all mankind matters. Your commitment to brotherhood and to bettering the community matters. Each chapter is different and I cannot boast that all chapters of Alpha are similar to the chapter that brought me into Alpha. What it will take is individual determination on the part of a particular aspirant, as well as a lot of patience and consistent self-advocacy. To this day, I struggle with locating an interpreter for fraternity events, particularly because interpreters who are also members of the fraternity are difficult to come by in my current location of St. Louis, MO. Does this stop me? Absolutely not. I pride myself on remaining financially current with the organization, though I have not attended an alumni meeting or been involved in chapter affairs since 2006 when I still lived in Washington, D.C. In the past, I've had discussions with another deaf fraternity member, Tim Albert, about the possibility of us approaching our fraternity's national headquarters about some of our concerns as deaf members. Certainly, should such an effort come to fruition, this could go a long way towards making a difference in

terms of opening the channels of communication. My strategy to date is to keep an eye open for strong deaf and hard of hearing candidates of the fraternity who already have a minimum of a bachelor's degree and who may be interested in pursuing alumni membership in the fraternity. Other deaf and hard of hearing members of black Greek fraternities and sororities have similar challenges and so I communicate with them about what approaches they will use or have used to increase access for deaf and hard of hearing members.

Last but not least, when I envisioned the "Black, Deaf, and Greek" project in connection with my duties as the newsletter editor for NBDA, I hoped among other things, that such a project would also increase Black Deaf Greek member visibility and raise the consciousness of hearing members of Black Greek organizations who may never have considered a deaf member. The members of Black Greek organizations that I meet who also have disabilities tend to "downplay" their difference; I am of the belief that such differences serve to highlight the diversity within our own organizations and we have just as much to learn from a deaf member as a hearing member, or any other member with a disability, for that matter. I look forward to conducting more interviews with Black, Deaf, and Greek members of the Divine 9! Please keep an eye out for an extension of this project, which will focus on the experiences of sign language interpreters who were instrumental in increasing the cultural sensitivity and competence of historically black fraternities and sororities.



Ernest Garrett, three days after initiation and still proudly sporting fraternity paraphernalia!



Before he was an Alpha: Ernest Garrett posing with close friend Renee Gray (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority)



Ernest Garrett (second from left) locking arms with line brothers outside the "Alpha Wall" at Philander Smith College April 27, 2001