

SPRING / SUMMER CENTENNIAL EDITION

The

PHI BETA SIGMA FRATERNITY, INC.

CRESCENT

Magazine



A Century of 'Culture for Service and Service for Humanity'

SPRING/SUMMER 2014



From Sigma Betas to Sigma Men

By Bro. Anthony Springer, Jr.

In 1950, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. became the first Greek-lettered organization to develop a youth auxiliary group. Under the direction of Dr. Parlette L. Moore, the Sigma Beta Club was founded to help young boys focus on the principles of Culture, Athletics, Social and Educational development. The Las Vegas Sigma Beta Club celebrates its 25th Anniversary this year. What follows is the story of hundreds of young men who became brothers, better men and lifelong friends. This is the story of the Las Vegas Sigma Beta Club.

More than twenty years after becoming a member of our wondrous band, Bro. Chris Rice found himself full circle at the 2014 Southern Region conference. While celebrating the Centennial, Bro. Rice met up with Bro. Danny Childs, the Sigma that introduced the then high school-aged Rice to Sigma. Unknown to Bro. Childs, Bro. Rice was wearing an accessory that cemented their bond many years ago: cufflinks.

In 1989, Bros. Childs and Greg Sandiford started the Las Vegas Sigma Beta Club. Rice was one of the Club's earliest members, joining in 1990. His fondness for cufflinks goes back to his senior prom. After putting on his tuxedo, Rice struggled to put on his cufflinks. With his mother out of town and no father in the picture, Rice turned to Bro. Childs for help. "My mother was away on vacation," Rice recalled. "I went to Danny's house and he helped me."

The Sigma Beta Club was the first youth auxiliary in Las Vegas, noted Bro. Marcus Smith. The initial members were a small group of friends who attended two high schools. "It was new and fresh, but we were just hanging out before we organized the group," he stated. And then, as if on cue, he motions to Bro. Rice: "Chris was always in the group and asked if they let white people in."

Bro. Rice pledged in the summer of 1992 at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In 1993, he became co-advisor of the Las Vegas Sigma Beta Club, before taking over full-time in 1995. As Sin City began a slow expansion, so did the youth auxiliary scene. The Sigma Beta Club was now joined by multiple fraternity and sorority sponsored youth groups. The bubbling subculture gave kids another outlet to make a name for themselves through stepping. The notoriety brought new members to the house that Sigma built.

Adrian Hunt, came to the Sigma Beta Club for the stepping, but stayed for the life lessons. "I'm getting my hair cut and all I hear is girls going crazy on a step show tape," he said. "Stepping was an attraction and I wanted to be down. Coming from the neighborhood I came from, I didn't know anything else but basketball. The guys around me were up to no good. Joining the Sigma Beta Club opened up so many doors, exposing me to careers I didn't know existed. The Sigma Beta Club saved my life. I could have been a product of my environment."

Others, like Rodell Dew, also found more value from the club than the hand claps that made teen girls swoon. "One of my cousins took me to my first step show and that's where I met some of the Betas. Girls everywhere. That's what drove me to the Sigma Beta Club, but I found out later that stepping wasn't my role. I told my cousin, 'Man, I'm going to be a Sigma Beta. Just tell me what I have to do.'"

The annual high school step shows were a boon for the city's youth groups. With more kids wanting to be a part of something, the show outgrew its origins in high school gyms. At its peak, it was hosted at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and rivaled any college step show of its time with more than 2,000 in attendance.

In the late nineties, the Sigma Beta Club had more than 100 members at 14 high schools in the Las Vegas Valley. "I remember so many times we'd have people in the parking lot," Donnell Thomas said with a smile. "Not because they didn't want to be in the meeting, but because they couldn't get in. We had that many people. We couldn't bring any more people in because of the fire codes."

With growing interest in the club, Bro. Rice tightened membership requirements. Aspirants were required to attend all meetings prior to initiation, write an essay on a famous Sigma, do community service and learn the history of the Club. "I did everything I could to cut kids by adding requirements for membership," Rice added. "They wouldn't leave."

Even at the peak of its popularity, the Sigma Beta Club was more than a social gathering. Members were exposed to different college and career paths, community service and leadership roles. At one point, the Club exposed members to life lessons through literature, reading Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Og Mandino's *The Greatest Miracle in the World*. Even extra-curricular activities were tied to scholarship. A coveted spot on the Sigma Beta Club Step Team hinged on maintaining good grades.

"We wanted so bad to impress Chris," Thomas said. "He hardly ever smiled. He used to say 'good job' but that would be it. No chest bumping or none of that. He was never high or low, he was right in the middle. Not knowing all along he was proud of all of us."

In the Club's 25-year history, more than 400 young men passed through the club, via membership. If one spends enough time in Las Vegas, echoes of the Club's motto, "The next generation of leaders, accepting responsibility and loving the challenge," are ever present in the midst of the bright lights of the world-famous Vegas Strip. Former Sigma Betas can be found running businesses or safeguarding the city through law enforcement.

And for a handful of men like Bros. Rice and Smith, the Sigma Beta Club was a precursor to Phi Beta Sigma. Today, Hunt, Dew and Thomas are also Sigma men. Bro. Rice, who stepped down as the Club's advisor in 2002, estimates that more than 40

kids from the Las Vegas Sigma Beta Club have gone on to become Sigma men.

"It's a proud moment," he said of watching a former Sigma Beta become a Sigma. "That somebody saw what you did and thought enough of it to want to do it too. As an adviser, there's no prouder moment."

Talk to enough former Sigma Betas who became Sigmas and a familiar pattern emerges: the early seeds of Brotherhood, Scholarship and Service sewn blossomed into life changers or life savers.

"Danny Childs and Greg Sandiford," Bro. Smith said. "Those guys pretty much changed our lives because they showed us something different. All I knew was sports."

"Sigma Beta helped me see a totally bigger picture," Bro. Thomas said. "It switched my whole frame of mind from handling business to being somewhere on time. Simple things like that. I can say two things saved my life: My mother and the Sigma Beta Club."

A broader sense of responsibility was also instilled. When Bro. Rice learned he was to become a young father, he wasn't nervous, despite not being raised by his biological father. He had the examples of his Sigma Beta advisers as a blue print. "I saw so many Sigmas handle business because of the Sigma Beta Club. When I learned I was going to be a father, I said 'I know what I need to do.' I was watching the guys before me."

Bro. Rice modeled the same behavior he saw, frequently bringing his young sons to Sigma Beta Club meetings. Years later, when other former Sigma Betas began to have families of their own, they pointed to Rice's example as a model.

"These kids watch," Bro. Hunt said. "I remember Chris had his sons with him at the meeting. Now I bring my son to Sigma Beta meetings. That advisor role is so crucial. The kids are watching. We watched."

Today, the Club is back to a handful of members, which allows the Las Vegas brothers more time to invest in individual members. While the 100 member days may never return, the bonds created and the examples set will last a lifetime.

"I've been gone from Vegas for 11 years," said Bro. Rice. "I still talk to somebody at least once a month from the Beta Club."