

Members of Black Sorority at Odds Over Leader's Spending

Lawsuit Filed Seeking Ouster Of President

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On the top floor of the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, around the corner from the gift shop, stands the statue of a dignitary in a long green beaded gown. The figure of Barbara A. McKinzie, president of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the nation's oldest black sorority, might not provoke the average museum visitor, but the objet d'art — and its disputed cost — has emerged at the core of a dispute fracturing the historic organization.

The sorority — which counts among its 225,000 members Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, three congresswomen and the president of Liberia — maintains that the statue was sculpted to honor the organization's centennial. But many members are furious, viewing the glorification of the president, known within AKA as the Supreme Basileus, as a window into wider allegations of financial mismanagement and ethical lapses.

A little more than a year after members gathered in Washington in their trademark pink and green outfits to celebrate the group's 100th birthday, a lawsuit filed in D.C. Superior Court has split the sorority, leaving some members worried about its credibility in the black community and as a charitable organization.

In June, eight members filed suit against McKinzie and AKA's board, alleging that the Supreme Basileus was improperly awarded a \$375,000 stipend, the first-ever compensation for the sorority's president.

The suit also claims that McKinzie used the sorority's American Express account to purchase lingerie and designer clothing for herself and friends, racking up American Express Rewards points that she then redeemed for gym equipment and a 46-inch high-definition Toshiba television. The members want



Barbara A. McKinzie, president of Alpha Kappa Alpha, stands between wax figures of herself and the late Nellie Quander, left, the sorority's first president, at a sorority function in June. The cost for the two figures totaled \$45,000.

the judge to remove McKinzie as president and want unapproved payments to be returned.

Melody McDowell, AKA's spokeswoman, declined a reporter's request to interview McKinzie and AKA executive director Betty N. James. McDowell would not discuss the lawsuit in detail but said all spending was properly authorized by the sorority's board. "All of these things are done with their overwhelming approval," McDowell said.

The lawsuit has raised questions about the role of the sorority in a time of change.

"People ask, 'Are they still relevant?'" said Sophia A. Nelson, an AKA sister in Loudoun County who wrote an essay posted on The Root, an online magazine on black issues, arguing that black sororities are as

vital as ever. "That question is now on the table for AKA. Do we reach a point where we become so assimilated in the culture that we don't need these organizations? For someone black who is in their 20s, they may not see the value of these organizations as much, because they have likely not yet faced the challenges of race in the workplace or in life in the same way someone who is, say 40, 50, or 60 has."

In e-mails obtained by The Washington Post, McKinzie told sorority members this summer that the lawsuit was "frivolous," denied any wrongdoing and said allegations about "personal use of AKA funds are false." She said the lawsuit's lead plaintiff (Joy Daley of Newburgh, N.Y.) had been sued by AKA for allegedly submitting inadequate expense reports. A New York judge

dismissed that suit, ruling that the sorority failed to prove its case.

McKinzie asked members to go onto Twitter, Facebook and MySpace "to defend AKA's good name." And she laid down some AKA law: "[O]ur rules dictate that the eight Sorors who filed this lawsuit be suspended, pending further resolution of their status..."

When Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Tex.) learned about the lawsuit, she chatted up a fellow AKA sister, Rep. Diane Watson (D-Calif.), during a break outside the House chamber.

"We both said we want to get to the bottom of it," said Johnson, 73, an AKA member for 35 years. "We were very hurt by it, actually. We have always been held to the highest standards, scholastically... and nothing like this has ever happened

before. At most, it's embarrassing and certainly a deviation of what the sorority has been known for."

Unlike other college fraternities and sororities, black Greek letter organizations include undergraduates, graduate students and professionals who join later in life. AKA's educational foundation provides college scholarships, and chapters across the country emphasize volunteerism, advocating for foster children, hosting community meetings on domestic violence and mentoring middle school boys.

Black fraternities and sororities emerged in the early 20th century, alongside civil rights movements led by activist W.E.B. DuBois and the NAACP, as support networks for the growing number of blacks on college campuses, said Lawrence C. Ross Jr., author of "The Divine Nine," a history of black Greek life. AKA, founded in 1908 at Howard University, places "a lot of emphasis on refinement, in terms of refined women, their looks, dress, elegant and very classy women," Ross said.

The plaintiffs are also fighting in the court of public opinion via a Web site called Friends of the Weeping Ivy, where court papers and other documents make the case that AKA directors failed to curb unreasonable expenditures. Documents show that AKA's former director of meetings and conferences, Kenitra Shackelford, reported to the board American Express charges for a \$6,500 Movado gold watch, an \$8,500 diamond heart and a \$1,000 ruby pinky ring.

The major issue ratcheting up AKA sisters' indignation has been the Supreme Basileus's compensation. According to the nonprofit's most recent tax return, McKinzie in 2007 received \$375,000 in compensation, up from zero the year before.

In contrast, the president of the NAACP was paid \$240,000, according to the group's most recent tax forms. The national president of AKA's rival, Delta Sigma Theta, drew no pay at all.

Linda White, 67, of Chicago, McKinzie's predecessor, took no compensation. "I treated it as a volunteer position," she said. "That's all I'd like to comment."

In 2009, McKinzie appears not to

be changing her ways: In June and July, she received five AKA checks totaling \$499,669, according to Edward Gray, a Washington attorney for the eight AKA plaintiffs. Gray received copies of the stubs by mail in an unmarked brown envelope with a return address that said only "Friend of the WI," or Weeping Ivy. The Ivy is a symbol of the sorority. In court papers, Gray has asked the sorority to verify the authenticity of the stubs.

In one e-mail, McKinzie said her stipend was part of the sorority's "professionalization." McDowell, the AKA spokeswoman, elaborated: "We don't do bake sales. This is a corporation. This is a business. Our Web site is aka1908.com — that means we're a company. Barbara is a certified public accountant. We will be solvent for years to come."

But much of the ire stems from the wax statue and its cost. The lawsuit alleged that AKA's board approved McKinzie's statue, along with a second one depicting the group's first president, Nellie Quander, at a Medici-esque cost of \$900,000.

Not so, according to Joanne Martin, founder of the National Great Blacks in Wax museum. "It was \$22,500 apiece for the works," she said.

McDowell, the AKA spokeswoman, said the statues were purchased by Washington area "hostess chapters," not the national organization. "Barbara didn't say, 'I want a statue of myself,'" McDowell said. "It wasn't to honor Barbara, but to tell the story of 100 years."

To some members, even the lower price tag stings.

"It was \$22,500? That doesn't make it better," said Leilani Lipa, 24, an Ernst and Young financial adviser and recent graduate of George Washington University, where she joined AKA's Mu Delta chapter.

"If people see this, they'll say, 'Well, they're spending thousands of dollars on a statue,' and it's like, what are we really spending money on for the community?"

Martin learned recently that McKinzie liked the statue but had one request. "She wanted the hair cut slightly," Martin said. "So, we're going to bob her hair a bit more."