



The Saracen Klub Journal

Documenting the History of the Beta Epsilon Chapter of Kappa Alpha Ps Fraternity, Inc.

Volume 1, Issue 3 February 2018 - Editor: Russell T Crockett (BE 1982)



Brother Michael Thomas (BE: Winter 1972 – Aliens 8-1)



Birthdate: January 16, 1954

Born/Raised: Cleveland, Ohio (Southeast Cleveland in the Lee Harper Area)

Parents: James (Longtown, OH) & Minnie Thomas (Greenville, SC via Chicago, IL)

Mike's parents met after Mike's father James, who served in WWII with his mother brother, returned from the war. Mike had a large extended family in the Cleveland area that included a strong support system with Aunt, Uncles and Cousins growing up nearby.

Early Education: Mike attended grade school close to home. He was tested and performed well for aptitude in 5th grade and was placed in an accelerated program. Both his junior high and high schools were magnets schools in the city of Cleveland aimed at college prep. Mike started school early (~6 months) – then skipped 7th grade, so he was always young for his age among his peers.

High School: Attended John Adams HS in Cleveland. The school when he enrolled was 60/40 white and black but as white students moved to a newly built school in the suburbs – Adams eventually became more segregated. The magnet nature of John Adams allowed Mike to take Biochemistry, Physics and Calculus in his senior year so that his first year of college, his course became more of a refresher, even using many of the same text books. Mike graduated from John Adams in 1971.

College/Major: Carnegie-Mellon University, BS 1975 Electrical Engineering

Life Milestones:

Mike shared many examples of life experiences that played a role in his development. As he reflected on these life milestones he said they may have seemed insignificant at the time, but played a major role in retrospect. Some of the life milestones included:

- (1) Playing Pinochle with his father/uncles at a young age (understanding card games, adult thought processes); His high school Chess team – Mike played on a highly-ranked HS team that allowed for Mike’s skilled development in strategy; Mike’s Dad took him often to stockholder meetings as a youngster – supplemented with his Dad investing 101 discussions – helped Mike establish the financial discipline for saving, retirement planning and wealth accumulation.

- (2) When it came time to select a college, Mike applied to Carnegie-Mellon, Case Western Reserve, Cornell and IIT – where he was accepted by all schools. He knew he needed to get away from home – which eliminated Case; IIT in Chicago city and Cornell in the middle of nowhere weren’t as good a fit for him. Given that his older Sister was already attending CMU and he would be joined by several others high school classmates, that made CMU a comfortable choice. C-MAP, the Carnegie-Mellon Action Project, designed to support and increase the number of minority engineering graduates from CMU, was influential. The C-MAP recruiters had come to John Adams throughout Mike’s senior year and assisted in getting students thru CMU’s admissions process.

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity

Smoker: A friend of Mike’s from John Adams high school suggested that they go to the Kappa interest meeting down at University of Pittsburgh in December of 1971. Mike was amazed at how much interest there was in Kappa as well as the number of undergraduate and Alumni brothers that attended the smoker. He recalls that Walter Roberts was the guest speaker at the smoker. During this time, there were about 35 Kappa brothers on the yard – the largest among the Black Greeks at Pitt.

Scroller’s Club:

After the smoker, Mike was interviewed and on January 20, 1972 was selected to be part of the Scrollers club. His good friend, who originally invited Mike to the smoker, wasn’t among his line brothers – he had fallen ill and had to return to Cleveland where he would unfortunately pass away later that year.

The Winter 1972 Scroller’s club started with 21 scroller’s – and by the first week they were down to eight. The dramatic culling of the group from 21 to 8

was due in large part to the scroller's club not use to the daily regiment and routine of caring for the large number of BB's from Pitt. Four of the eight that remained were blue collar kids from Pittsburgh; the other four were middle class kids from Cleveland OH, Queens, NY, Mobile AL and Baltimore, MD. Differences in personality and upbringing among the eight scrollers complicated the line dynamics – but as with most pledge programs the group grew closer together from the pledge experience.

The Scroller's dean of pledges, Joe Peoples (a neophyte from the line Ka Ka Tanu or Three Brothers – Winter 71)), had a greeting that was the genesis the scrollers line name:

Hello BB Boone – Alien from the MFing moon, sired by Frankenstein and Alice the Goon....

Aliens 8-1 was the line name adopted by the scrollers – the minus one as a result of one barbarian dropping (Skeets from Duquesne University) on the first day of hell week. The Hell week program for Aliens contained all of the same set of rituals – a standard experienced by most of the lines made at BE – most repeated for every line after Aliens 8-1. The Aliens 8-1 line pledged for 10 weeks - going over on April 1, 1972. Mike said he and his fellow barbarians all day thought it was an April fool's joke until the end.

As a contrast to some of the more mundane scroller activities, there were brothers like Joe McCormick, Doug Browning, and Tony Parker who all provided wisdom during the pledge program. In addition, some of the graduate brothers at CMU and Pitt like Bo Holmes provided insight about the light at the end of the tunnel, direction about life and the essence of Kappa. Holmes would also provide a refuge when the line needed some quiet time. George Lewis, Jeff Jackson, and Eugene Leak provided a similar respite. All these brothers, according to Mike, provided words of wisdom and you knew that there was a method to some of the madness to becoming a member of Kappa Alpha Psi.

Brotherhood:

Mike became life member in Kappa in 1975 and has been active since he graduated without pause - A model and real symbol of his brotherhood. Mike described his love and commitment to Kappa being based on the linkage between the undergraduate brother and older brother. This is one of the things that Mike professes even today. Shortly after Mike crossed, Brother George Charlton, past East Central Province Polemarch, took Mike under his wing and provided experiences in Kappa that reinforced what Mike professes today. Charlton involved Mike in trips with him annually to all East Central chapters,

province meetings and national conclaves starting in 1972 which reinforced the theme of why it's important to establish a meaningful interaction between an older and younger brother of Kappa. The fellowship and brotherhood that existed between George and Mike is symbolic of what the founders of Kappa envisioned. Mike got choked up when talking about Brother Charlton when asked to speak about his experiences with him. "Of all the brothers that I have met in my life – he is probably the most dedicated brother – and I have met a lot of brothers from the grand chapter to the local chapter - I learned from the best. I broke his heart because he wanted me to take over for him in the role of Province Polemarch when he left. I told him with all of the experiences that I have had – which he had been responsible for most – I apologized and told him that I understood what he was trying to do, but because of where I was in my life with family and work, that I appreciated the offer but I couldn't see myself doing what he had done. Brother Charlton was like a father – and I was like a son to him – in fact I referred to him and his wife Nadine as my Pittsburgh parents. And I know I hurt him with my decision but I had to do what was right for me and my family."

Brother Charlton was not well liked by the undergraduates because George was unrelenting on what the undergraduates should do. He would often say "I see what you are doing but here is what you should be doing" - with no discussion – just like a military operation - "my way or the highway" - but Mike knew he always spoke in the best interest of Kappa. The undergrad brothers resented him for that approach and in some cases, were hostile and disrespectful to him – and more than once Mike had to step in between George and some of the younger brothers. Instead of the younger brothers being respectful, and understanding what Brother Charlton was proposing was for the betterment of the brothers of Kappa – most weren't receptive to this position and in many cases, were hostile to him. Despite these negative opinions and reactions – Charlton persevered and is a major reason Mike feels so strongly about him as the most dedicated brother he's ever met. In 1973 as a neophyte, Mike served as the flag bearer for the East Central province at the Conclave in Miami, he also served on many national committees at the urging of Brother Charlton and has continued to impart the wisdom and knowledge gained from those experiences to other brothers he encounters, particularly the younger members of the fraternity.

Pittsburgh Alumni:

In 1979, Mike became Polemarch of Pittsburgh Alumni – at the time when the average age of the alumni brothers was 60 years of age – so Mike helped to usher in a younger Alumni group; in 1982 Mike started the Kappa league program – with the first grant offered by the Kappa fund – which was unique. They took kids on the margin, in the court system and set them on a course to reset themselves. Also in 1982, Mike was a founding board member of KASCF

– scholarship fund and in 27 years raised \$1.75 million in scholarships. Lastly, Mike helped restart Kappa league in 2016 – with the aim of helping the youngsters in the program with goal setting toward a better and productive life.

Adult Life

Professional

Career: Blessed to work in an engineering organization within US Steel; was one of the only blacks in a managerial position at the time. In many cases, the plant management was unfamiliar early on dealing with young black managers. But Mike would not be deterred when it came to deadlines, or overcoming barriers – he stayed firm and unrelenting to show that he meant business. He enjoyed working in foreign countries such as China, Taiwan, and Russia in the late 1970's and early 1980's. He worked in the largest Steel mill in China – spending about a year in that plant. His last trip to China – was one week before the Tiananmen square revolt and he was in Frankfurt a few days before a radical group shot of the Airport. The beauty of his travels he recalled was calling his Dad and saying, “you would believe where I am” – which would make his Dad's day – beaming with pride. All eye opening and prideful experiences for Mike. He went on to say that no one ever questioned his authority or ability – probably based on his CMU pedigree.

After 11 years at US Steel, Mike continued his career in the project engineering space with several firms continuing to work on projects at increasing levels of responsibilities until his retirement in 2014. His last project – was the largest and most complex of his career where Mike managed 150 engineers, drafters and support personnel on a project that cost \$250 million.

Family: Wife Marsha & two daughter – daughters are 5 years apart in age.

Other Anecdotes

- Mike McClendon and Mike Thomas interviewed Russell Washington back in 1996/7 and they captured 3 hours of tape on Brother Washington along with 30 or so pictures that chronicle his life.
- Mike was featured in Ebony magazine as a most eligible bachelor.
- George Charlton's daughter Susan, was a high school classmate of Mike's in Cleveland – which Mike discovered by seeing her picture in Charlton's basement.
- George Charlton was one of the last Buffalo Soldier's in the Army, rising to the ranks of Lt Col. He was also the first black treasury agent in Pittsburgh, one of the first black directors of the city operation under Pete Flaherty. Brother Charlton was very active in Kappa from the time he went over in 1952. He won the Elder Watson Diggs award, was a grand board member, and served as Province Polemarch for 14 years.
- The Lonnie Evans incident – Mike was the BE advisor at the time – he received a call from one of the brothers at 2 am the morning that Lonnie had been shot at 234 McKee Place and had been taken to the hospital where he later passed away. Mike asked the caller if the police were there at the house, and if the officers had taken statements. He suggested to all the undergraduate brothers that once the police were done with the situation that they should find some other place to go. Mike then drove down to the McKee house and cleaned up the bloody area where Lonnie had been shot. Given the gravity of the situation Mike said that Brother Charlton was instrumental later in helping to lift Mike's spirits.
- Mike shared a story about Charlton's undergraduate experience from 1952. Brother Charlton was a part-time student when he pledged. He was a treasury agent and carried a 38 pistol. Mike said "you can probably envision what I'm about to tell you" quoting George - "Ain't nobody going to make me do something I don't want to do – I have been in the army, I am a treasury agent, I have a family...you know I'm not having any foolishness". So, as a result there was none of that on George's 1952 line. Charlton passed in 2012 at the age of 82 – making him 22 years of age when he pledged at Pitt.



Holiday Goodies

University of Pittsburgh Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi gave Thanksgiving dinners to needy families. They are row (left to right, bottom row: Samuel Yates, Lonzo Green, Neal Smith, Keith Smith, Denise Hightower Sweetheart), George Brown, Keith Webb. Top row from left to right is: Bruce Murclough, Booney Smith, Randy Shampert, Willie Moore, Mike Thomas. — Harris photo.



Lake Fong Post-Gazette

Moses McNeese and Michael Thomas

Kappa Scholarship Dinner

Feeling as buoyant as the red and white balloons that decorated the Syria Mosque's ballroom in Cheswick Friday night were the 230 guests at Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc.'s Pittsburgh Alumni Chapter's 12th annual Valentine's Day Scholarship Ball. Making the rounds before event chair Michael Thomas (with Marsha) officially welcomed all were chapter president Moses McNeese (with Wilma) and event co-chairs Thomas Motley (with Lillie) and Ted Duncan (with Val Washington). Motley was honored with an achievement award for his efforts to establish the Kappa Scholarship Endowment Fund. The benefit has raised \$13,000 for needy African-American males pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees. Among those dining to deliver the dollars were Bessie and Arthur Butler, Sam and Tajauna Stephenson, Janet and Greg Spencer, Barry and Cheryl Lumsden, David and Cynthia Hobbs, Dewitt Walton, Ron and Karen Hunt and Dr. Ralph and Donna Holmes. — PS.



ELECTRICAL ENGINEER

Michael B. Thomas, 24, has been employed as an electrical engineer in the design engineering department of United States Steel Corp., of Pittsburgh for three years. Thomas' duties include specification, design, construction, inspection and starting of electrical equipment at the steel manufacturer's steel mill facilities. He formerly worked at Alkela Aluminum in a similar capacity. Thomas is a 1975 graduate of Carnegie-Mellon University with a B.S. degree in electrical engineering. He is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., and has acted as a consultant to civil and business organizations in Pittsburgh. Cleveland-born Thomas is single.