

A ‘Step’ into history: Historically Black fraternities, sororities host cultural dance showcase

A&M’s National Pan-Hellenic Council brings back Step Dance tradition after a five-year hiatus

Lillian Haynes, Life & Arts Writer

A celebration of culture and history, the Black History Month Step Show, hosted by Texas A&M’s chapter of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, or NPHC, was a time of great celebration and joy.

The NPHC, comprising nine historically African American fraternities and sororities known as The Divine Nine, promotes unity and leadership among its members and serves the wider community with excellence and style.

Seven of the nine greek chapters are represented on A&M’s campus, including: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.



Ashely Bautista

Jacob Gasaway, member of the Delta Theta chapter of Phi Beta Sigma fraternity inc. of Prairie View A&M University, twirls his cane during the BHM Step Show in Rudder Form on Friday, Feb. 28, 2025. (Ashely Bautista/The Battalion)

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Reflecting their commitment to community growth and perseverance, A&M's NPHC council hosted the Black History Month Step Show for the first time in almost five years on Feb. 28.

NPHC president and civil engineering senior Daniel Ashley said the event had been months in the making, as the executive council and members alike worked to bring back the beloved Aggie tradition.

"We do these shows to pay homage to the histories of our organizations and the organization of our people," Ashley said. "I'm just really excited because the fact that I'm ... a part of NPHC and seeing such a large fundraiser and a large part of our history come together, despite us being so small and ever growing, really makes me happy."

Step dance — commonly referred to as stepping — is a percussive dance originating from West Africa, where it was performed in ancient African folk dances and celebrations. Coming to the United States during the transatlantic slave trade, it took on its percussive style due to the lack of instruments enslaved Africans had at their disposal, as they used their bodies as a form of expression and protest.



Members of the Luminous Lambda Lambda Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. of Texas A&M leans during the BHM Step Show in Rudder Form on Friday, Feb. 28, 2025. (Ashely Bautista/The Battalion)

The origins of stepping also trace back to the gumboot dance, a communication method used by enslaved South Africans when they were prohibited from speaking while working in mines.

“They had to use their steps, their hands, their boots to communicate, basically like a morse code,” Ashley said. “And that in itself has been adapted into what we know today as stepping, as

African Americans brought that influence into our shows.”

Not only did stepping start to incorporate musicality, but it also began to take shape as a combined routine of complex movements and drills. Following emancipation, the art form mixed with other popular art movements — including jazz, hip-hop, break-dancing and Afro-Caribbean beats — creating the dance and music style it is today.

Hosted at the Rudder Forum, the audience turnout was a success, with many spectators standing due to the overflow. The event was hosted by graduate student James Baldwin, a member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc..

While mainly focusing on the students’ captivating routines, Baldwin also gave a brief history of Black History Month, alongside a moment of silence for Caleb Wilson: a student at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana who formed part of one of NPHC’s organizations and passed away from a hazing incident at an off-campus event.

Following Baldwin’s speech, the Delta Zeta Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. performed a high-energy step routine based on Cartoon Network’s “Regular Show”. Based out of Prairie View A&M, the group incorporated rhythmic movements with stunning group synchronization, keeping the audience engaged with humorous bits and versatile motions.

The camaraderie and brotherhood amongst members were shown throughout the performance as they truly reflected their organization’s motto, “Culture for Service and Culture for Humanity” — their driving pillar since their founding in 1914.

The Xi Psi Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., or AKA, founded in 1908 and coming to A&M in 1985, drew inspiration from the award-winning movie “Wicked”, as they played off each other’s energy with grit and grace.

“AKA has been on this campus for 40 years, stepping here since 1985,” the group’s members chanted during their routine. “It’s time we break it down. Really slow down. It’s Black History Month, and this organization has 117 years of history.”

Performing in pink and green as a nod to both “Wicked” and their organization’s signature colors, the group went on to note prominent figures in the Black community, including former Vice President Kamala Harris and Mae Jemison — the first African American woman to fly in space — who have continued to “defy gravity” and create opportunities for future generations.



Members of the Xi Psi Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. of Texas A&M, steps during the BHM Step Show in Rudder Form on Friday, Feb. 28, 2025. (Ashely Bautista/The Battalion)

Visualization senior Sydney Bertrand, the vice president of NPHC, formed part of the showcase through the Lambda Lambda Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., whose routine incorporated elements unique to her organization, including canes and the group’s signature blue and gold colors. Their routine was based on a popular African American family gathering referred to as a cookout, which kept the audience on the edge of their seats throughout the performance.

“My favorite part about stepping ... is people’s reactions when you do something that may be perceived as difficult or something that someone thinks, ‘Whoa, you definitely spent a lot of time on that,’” Bertrand said.

One of these “wow” moments was when Bertrand’s group performed the Sigma Lean, where dancers form a single-file line, grab onto the person in front of them, lean back and lift the person they grabbed. Once the audience recognized what was about to happen, the room was deafening with their energetic reactions.

“It’s a test of sisterhood and bonding and trust within our organization,” Bertrand said.

Bertrand said the group spent months preparing the event, and members of her executive council contacted members who previously attended A&M in a Black Greek letter chapter for guidance.

These members were seen in the audience and on stage. About halfway through the event, the NPHC invited them to stroll with the current chapter members. Strolling — an African American, synchronized dance that reflects the values of love and community — is more casual than stepping, allowing performers to build community through its rhythmic movements and chanting.

“Strolling further connects us across the country,” Bertrand said. “You’re more than likely going to know at least one stroll that another member of your organization knows, fostering community amongst our organizations.”

"[It shows] the history of our organizations and ... where my people come from," Ashley said. "Where my organizations come from, what they mean to us, [and] how our organizations have evolved into what it is now."

One of the last step routines of the night and a parody of the famous Netflix's "Squid Games," the Omicron Omega Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., exhibited the emotions and depth that goes into step, also incorporating breathtaking gymnastic moves, including flips, handsprings and breakdance.



Members of the OWTrageous Omicron Omega Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. of Texas A&M steps during the BHM Step Show in Rudder Form on Friday, Feb. 28, 2025. (Ashely Bautista/The Battalion)

"Unity is our true power," the group chanted. "When we unite, we achieve greatness. There is no individual in step."

Toward the end of their routine, they performed the Founders Step: a step sequence unique to the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.. Performed and learned during the sorority's initiation, it serves as a reminder of long-lasting legacy and pays homage to the

organization's founders. For four minutes, the once loud crowd stood quiet, watching the discipline, synchronicity and power displayed by the group.

Tech service management junior Kaiya Burden, chapter president of the Xi Psi Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, Inc. expressed her emotions regarding the showcase, demonstrating the first-hand effect of these events in local communities. Having done step since elementary school, she was excited to bring stepping back to A&M.

"The biggest thing has been learning how to modernize it," Burden said. "Trying new ways to incorporate things that connect with us ... while keeping in mind the history of step shows and the history of our chapters on campus."

Providing students with an avenue of self-expression, community and joy, Black student organizations continue to be an important part of the university experience.

"This is the first show in a long time, and hearing about the history and the culture of Black organizations on campus at A&M is really, really important," Burden said. "Step shows are tied into each of our organization histories and chapter histories. With every step show there is a personal touch for the people who are in the step show at the time. You kind of get to make your mark in that way."

Drawing the night to a close, Baldwin thanked everyone in attendance.

"I hope people will further engage with our organization and look into what we do for the community and ourselves," Bertrand said.

Fostering a sense of identity for many, either forming part of NHPC or even just attending one of their events is a way to connect with the group on campus.

"I am a part of this organization that allows me to be something bigger than what I am by myself," Ashley said. "And to see people want to learn more about it whether that be through our strolling or our stepping or through our community service engagement means so much."