

SHINING EXAMPLE

Sister Organization to Boys II Men Sets Foundation

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by Erika Wurst –Staff Writer



AURORA -- They wear matching colors, but they're not a gang. They have a motto, but they're not a club.

They are the Elegant Ladies of the Diamonds, teenage members of a recently formed sorority for local black and Hispanic women fighting to nix the negative stereotypes plaguing minorities.

"People say, 'Latino women drop out of school and have babies, or 'Black women are on welfare,'" said Clayton Muhammad, public relations director for East Aurora School District and current group leader. "These young girls feel they're in a world where they're fighting against stereotypes -- cultural and gender -- but they're still succeeding and achieving."

The Diamonds came to a recent meeting dressed to the nines -- proudly sporting the black, brown and pink. Some wore sweater vests and fancy slacks; others donned high heels and hoop earrings, wearing gold name-plates around their necks. But no matter how different each girl looked, their goals remained the same.

"I know how much animosity and anger there is between blacks and Hispanics, and girls in general," said Kierston Castleberry, 17, an East Aurora junior and co-president of the Diamonds. "I want there to be peace among us. We all live in the same neighborhood; we should work together."

The girls -- from East and West Aurora, Rosary, Oswego East and Waubonsie Valley high schools -- follow in the footsteps of Boys II Men, a fraternity for minority teens Muhammad started five years ago as a way to combat violence in Aurora. Since then, the group has grown from being anti-gang to "a fraternity for phenomenal young men," he said.

This female group would be no different. "There are so many programs for kids who aren't on the right path," said Muhammad. "We just went the other way."

But as these young women strive to break cultural stereotypes, they're facing some new ones.

"Before, I thought of 'sorority' and the first thing I pictured was the movies," said Lynnette Montanez, 17, a junior at West Aurora High School and co-president of the Diamonds. "They are always really mean to people who aren't in it. But knowing Mr. Muhammad and the boys from Boys II Men, I knew it wasn't going to be like that."

Try telling that to the hundreds of girls who weren't hand-picked by a Boys II Men member to be inducted into the sorority in November. Since day one, girls who didn't get the "golden ticket" into the sorority have written letters, e-mails, and left messages for Muhammad criticizing the organization for being elitist.

"There's a process to building a sisterhood," Muhammad said, defending the group. "There have to be standards. You have to earn your way in. We do it with sports all the time."

So the girls debated admissions criteria over pizza and hot wings during their afternoon meeting, seated like members of the United Nations around a long table at the Quad County Urban League in Aurora.

"We're not judging people," said Montanez. "But you're not going to walk on the basketball court and be the main player. A lot of us have known Mr. Muhammad for a while. We have proven ourselves."

The sorority's main focus will be on mentoring middle school students who are most at risk of dropping out -- a need that is being recognized by educators citywide, said Steve Janca, a counselor at West Aurora.

"We're taking all the kids from the West Side and putting them in one area," which is a big culture shock for students used to small classes and familiar faces.

But these teens are firm believers that, when faced with any negative situation, if you can "change your mind, you can change your life," - a saying Lynnette Montanez's mother believes can go a long way.

Carmen Hicks struggled raising her daughter as a single mother in Aurora. "Things happen in life," she said. "That doesn't mean the world is over for you. Just set your goals. If you want to do it, you can."

Her daughter, said Hicks, sees many negative things happening around; including drug use; yet Lynnette has chosen to take a different path.

"She sees something out there much better than that," said Hicks.

