

Di and Phi Societies Find New Life After Illustrious History
The Phoenix, October 19, 1989
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Every Monday night at 7:30, on the top floor of New West, a group of about 50 people gather in a room furnished with graceful antique furniture. They talk among themselves as they take their seats on each side of the chamber. Portraits of governors, educators, and a United States president stare down from the walls. There is a rapping of a cane from a well-appointed dais at the front of the chamber, and conversation ceases as the group is called to order.

Three years ago, it seemed questionable whether the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies (Di and phi) would survive to see their 194th year. The Societies, the second oldest student organization in the South, had barely enough members to survive. Kevin Cherry, a past president of the joint Di-Phi Senate and a graduate student in History from Denver, NC., said the organization that gave the University its colors, endowed the library and created the Honor Court had almost faded into obscurity.

Di-Phi came up with a simple plan to avoid oblivion, Cherry continued.

"We decided, come hell or high water, that we were going to do what the Societies had always done, but we would let people know about it. We refused to change and it worked."

The Societies have worked to publicize their meetings, holding programs in the Pit and reactivating the organization's magazine, *The White and Blue*. The publicity has had the desired effect. Membership has improved and is still getting better, said Cherry.

According to Stephen Wood, current president of the joint senate and a senior from Charlotte, the purpose of the Societies for almost two centuries has been "to promote useful knowledge and create lasting friendships." Originally, the organizations were begun as debating societies, and at one time, every student was required to be a member of either the Di or the Phi.

James Burroughs, editor of the Societies Magazine, *The White and Blue*, said that the two societies formed independently and existed separately for a long time. Burroughs said that though the two societies were bitter rivals when they were first organized, they came together in the middle of this century to form a joint senate.

The stories of the early rivalry between the groups tell of disagreements over national politics and the fining of members for breaches of conduct. These breaches included laughing out loud, not turning in homework, talking back to the professor, not dressing like gentlemen, and urinating out windows.

"The two societies were intensely competitive," said Brian Brigman, a first year med student from Charlotte and past president of the joint senate. The competition ranged from building libraries and tombstones to recruiting members. "Legend has it that duels were fought over prospective members," added Brigman.

While there is no record of anyone being killed in a duel over a member, the University's Board of Trustees finally intervened around 1850 to stop the fighting. The Board passed a resolution mandating that in-state students from east of Orange County had to join the Phi while instate students from west of Orange County had to join the Di. "Students from Orange County and from out of state still had their choice," said Brigman. The societies have continued to observe this dividing line.

Much of the Societies' activities revolve, as they always have, around debate, discussion, and the presentation of original papers, both opinion and fiction, Brigman said. Wood added that, "this gives members a rare opportunity to synthesize and apply what they have learned in the classroom."

Brigman agreed, saying that it was that opportunity which attracted him to the Societies as an undergraduate majoring in Philosophy and Physics. "I was trying to get things straight," said Brigman. "In the Societies, when we come across a problem, we analyze it using what we have learned in the classroom."

However, Cherry was quick to point out that Di-Phi is not just an ancient debate society. It is also a social organization, he said, noting the charge in the Societies preamble to "create lasting friendships."

Duane Mauney, a sophomore from Shelby who has been a member for six months, agreed. "It (the societies) is a place where you make a lot of good friends," he said.

Fellowship also means a lot to Bill Elliott, a senior from Goldsboro. "It's a family," he said. "It's a place to retreat from the insanity of the University and be together."

Much of the social interaction in the Societies takes place through informal activities, held mostly in the Phi Chamber. "This is where most of the Societies committees meet and members go to study or talk," said Wood. The Societies also have planned formal events, such as a ball that will be held later this year.

The Societies are like if you take a Greek organization, a literary magazine, and a debate team and mix them all up, "Cherry said. "It is not like any of those by any means, but it is a little of all three."

The Societies have had an enormous impact on the history of the University and the country since they were formed in 1795. According to Wood, most of the Societies' influence has been through its alumni. A partial list of distinguished alumni includes: U.S. President James K. Polk (Di); U.S. Senator Samuel Ervin, Jr. (Di); U.S. Vice President William King (Phi); Author Thomas Wolfe (Di); Albert Coates (Di); Frank Porter Graham (Di); Paul Green (Phi); Thomas S. Kenan (Phi); Kemp Plummer Battle (Di); and Governors Luther H. Hodges (Di), William B. Umstead (Phi) and James B. Aycock (Phi).

In all, the Societies provided North Carolina with 11 U.S. Senators, 13 governors, a general, a noted judge and a host of educators.

The Societies were the incubator where these people debated and discussed their thoughts, added Cherry. "It gave people time to talk about what was important--to think about it. After speaking about it with their friends, they would go out and do it."

The Societies have had a national as well as statewide impact. U.S. President James K. Polk's ideas of Manifest Destiny were first discussed and debated while he was a member of the Societies, Cherry said. Manifest Destiny was the defining issue of Polk's presidency in the 1840s.

However, the Societies have also had a more direct and lasting affect on the University. The list of involvements are long and impressive. Among them are the endowment of the University Library, the creation of the honor system, service as the first student government, the originator of the school's colors, and the assembly of the largest private portrait collection in the State.

As in almost all of their endeavors, the Societies tried to outdo each other, Brigman noted. By 1886, when Louis Round Wilson convinced the Societies to start donating their libraries to the University, each group owned more than 10,000 volumes, which was much larger than the University library.

In return for the books, the University agreed to officially name the library, "The Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Endowed by the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies," and place that name on all the bookplates in the library. "The University also agreed to provide in perpetuity, one scholarship to each society each year, to be given to one of the members," said Brigman. While the University still honors the name agreement, it stopped giving the required scholarships in 1939.

The Societies portrait collection is another outgrowth of the competition between the Di and the phi. In 1819, the Phi began collecting portraits with a painting of Johnston Blakely, an alumnus who was a hero of the War of 1812, Brigman said. The Di started collecting portraits soon afterward. Cherry said that the collection currently includes 100 paintings and six busts. The last addition to the collection was in 1979, when the Societies bought a portrait of Thomas Wolfe. Approximately half of the collection is on display at locations around the University, including the Di and Phi chambers, Morehead Planetarium, The Undergraduate admissions office and the main libraries.

The Societies colors, Di's blue and Phi's white, became the University's colors in the 1880s, Cherry said. "The football team started playing other universities that had school colors and decided they needed some. The team adopted the colors of the Societies as its own."

Though they no longer have such profound and wide-reaching influence on the University as they once had, the Societies still actively pursue the betterment of student life at UNC-CH. They award the annual Willie P. Mangum Medal for Oratory--the University's oldest Chancellors Award--and the Henry Horace Williams Award for Excellence in Undergraduate teaching. They also sponsor the annual Kemp Plummer Battle Lecture on UNC History that takes lace every University Day. The Societies also publish The White an Blue, a magazine that includes fiction, history, commentary, and records the Societies business.

"The Di and Phi receive no student fees," Wood said. They are funded by themselves and through their alumni although they received funding for this year's White and Blue from the North Caroliniana Society, a private group associated with the North Carolina Collection.

With the recent increase in membership, the Societies are finding new life, showing that intelligent discussion and fellowship still have appeal after 194 years, said Bill Elliott, a senior History major from Goldsboro who is past president of the joint senate. "We are a lasting tradition. A tradition that doesn't appeals dies, so we are still appealing," he said.

Michael Kolb, a senior political science major from Charlotte, agreed. "The Societies are linkage to the University's past that, sadly, too few students have a chance to experience. This is an interesting group of people, a lot of talk, a lot of argument, a lot of debate . . .you can't beat that."

For those interested in joining the Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies, meetings are held at 7:30 every Monday while class is in session in the Di Chambers on the third floor of New West.