The Black Alumni Council Celebrates 35 Years

Washington University’s Black Alumni Council was founded in the spring of 1983, coinciding with the 10th Reunion of the Class of 1973. That year, Alex Carroll, AB ’73, expressed an interest in celebrating the university’s largest graduating class of African-American students. Cynthia Cosby, BS ’93, joined the staff of the Program in African and African-American Studies in 1971 (the program became a full department in 2016), and she knew the Class of 1973 well. “It was a perfect opportunity to ask our African-American alumni if they would like to get involved with the university on a new level, something I had been thinking about for some time,” says Cosby. The idea of an African-American alumni organization was well-received, and by the end of Reunion 1983, the Black Alumni Council (BAC) was born.

A core group of volunteers formed an initial steering committee, and they identified three guiding goals for the council: to support the professional and personal development of the university’s black alumni; to assist the university with the recruitment and retention of African-American students; and to enhance the continued growth and development of the university as an exemplary institution. This mission has remained central to the council’s priorities and activities for the past 35 years.

In addition to organizing social and networking activities for African-American alumni in St. Louis and across the country, the BAC has worked with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions—staffing college fairs and calling admitted students—to help with student recruitment. The group also organizes community service projects, sponsors campus seminars and panel discussions, hosts a fall reception for African-American faculty, and provides consistent support and mentorship for student organizations such as Black Senior Alliance and the Association of Black Students.

The BAC held its first scholarship dinner dance fundraiser in 1989. That year, the council created The Black Alumni Council Emergency Fund to provide immediate resources for full-time students with unanticipated financial need. Six years later, the group established The Black Alumni Council Endowed Scholarship (formerly the Washington-DuBois Endowed Scholarship). Since 1995, more than 100 students have received financial assistance from one of these two Black Alumni Council funds.

Upon Cosby’s retirement in late 2015, the BAC transitioned to the Alumni Association, which heightened engagement across the university and the nation. Today, there are more than 7,800 African-American Washington University alumni worldwide. Currently, the Black Alumni Council is active in Baltimore, San Francisco, Chicago, and Washington D.C., and the university anticipates increased growth in membership and activity in cities across the country in the next few years. Kandyce St. Clair Woods, AB ’07, a BAC volunteer, organized a BAC happy hour attended by nearly 50 alumni in Chicago last August. Those who attended this inaugural Chicago event expressed an interest in volunteering for local community service projects. Last fall, the Chicago BAC chapter coordinated with the Alumni and Parents Admission Program to represent Washington University at the 100 Black Men of Chicago College Fair, and chapter members are making plans to visit the DuSable Museum of African American History.
Woods notes, “I have heard from many enthusiastic alumni who want to get involved—the need is there. We want to be more engaged with the university, reconnect with each other, and offer current WashU students mentorship and networking opportunities.”

For more information about the Black Alumni Council:
Contact Elizabeth Williams-Johnson at 314-935-4557 or ewilliams-johnson@wustl.edu.

Several founding members of the Black Alumni Council gather for a photo during Reunion at Thurtene Carnival in April 2018. From left to right: Joyce Price, AB ’73; Katherine Mapp, BS ’73; Juanita Chambers, AB ’73; Alex Carroll, AB ’73; Lewis Price, BS ’73; Ronald Sherod, BSBA ’73, JD ’76, MBA ’77; and Michael Willis, BArch ’73, MArch ’76, MSW ’76.
Black Alumni Council members gathered at a 1992 Reunion Picnic with Chancellor Emeritus William H. Danforth. From left to right: the late Dean James McLeod (holding Robert Smith Jr.’s daughter), the late Joel R. Dickson, BS ’64, the late Robert Smith Jr., BS ’72, and Chancellor Emeritus William H. Danforth.

Black Alumni Council members met with Chancellor Danforth during Reunion 1992. From left to right: Louis G. Hutt Jr., BSBA ’76 (now a Washington University trustee); Ronnie E. Dixon, AB ’77; Chancellor Emeritus William H. Danforth; Karen Drake, AB ’81; Glenn L. Dalton, JD ’77; and the late Joel R. Dickson, BS ’64.