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Curtis Ferguson

NSMH:

A dream of belonging fulfilled



By
Olivia M.
Hall

NSMH alum William Avitia '05 gets to know current member Stacy Delapenha '14 as he recruits for his company at an NSMH career fair.

Inset: SHA staffer Yariela Kerr-Donovan '89, MPS '00, NSMH's founding advisor, in 1991

Curtis Ferguson



Penni Urquhart '92

25

When members of the National Society of Minorities in Hospitality (NSMH) gathered in St. Louis for the organization's twenty-fifth national conference this past February, it felt like a giant family reunion.

Several generations—from seasoned hospitality professionals to current students—came together to celebrate an idea, first expressed as an SHA-only student club, that blossomed 24 years ago into a national organization. NSMH now boasts more than 100 chapters and 2,000 members. It has become, according to its leadership, the second-largest student-run organization in the country.

NSMH's four founders—Alfred Watts '91, Evan Frazier '92, Michael Burkeen '92, and

Penni Wint Urquhart '92—were there at the conference to celebrate the thriving network that has grown from their shared desire to offer minority students with a love for hospitality a means to connect across campuses.

"It was a response to a dream, the dream we had to take what I believe was a gift at Cornell and expose it to other schools around the country," said Watts, who now leads a very large congregation and several international missions as pastor of the Cornerstone Christian Center in Milford, Connecticut.

That gift was the sense of belonging that the four SHA students found as members of the Society of Minority Hoteliers (SMH), the campus club that spawned NSMH.

SMH was formed in 1984, five years before Burkeen, Frazier, Watts, and Wint began transforming it into a national organiza-

Jesse Winter

Jesse Winter

tion in the fall of 1989. The founders of SMH were Clyde Robinson '89, who is now deceased, Michael Liburd '86, and brothers Felix '86 and Luis '88 Laboy.

"One of the main reasons we started the SMH was because we minority students were looking for summer internships and career networking," explained Felix Laboy. "Many students at the hotel school had family or business connections in the hotel or travel business, and we felt like we didn't. A few of us talked about wanting a group that would help with career opportunities and developing industry mentors and really get the small number of minority students at the school feeling like they weren't alone and that there was a club they could go to and associate with."

When Frazier arrived on campus four years later, he was grateful that the group existed. "While the school was great in having resources and advisors for students, as a minority student on a campus that did not have a lot of African



Alfred Watts '91

Americans at the time, I still had a very strong sense of isolation. I remember how important SMH was to me in feeling connected."

The lack of minority representation in leadership positions in the hospitality industry was a topic of concern at the first annual conference in March 1990. John Dixon, general manager of a Marriott property in Washington, D. C. and one of the event's distinguished speakers, drove the point home. "He told us that about 75 percent of the industry consisted of minorities and women," Frazier remembered. "He said that if one percent of general managers at the 50,000 hotels in the country were African American, that would be 500. But the reality was that there were just fifteen African American general managers, three of them women—and two of those women were with us at the conference. It was a powerful statistic that characterized how far we still had to go."

Beginnings

SMH provided such career development opportunities as visits to hotels and restaurants in other cities, which enabled contact with alumni and other local hospitality professionals who could share their experiences as minorities working in the hospitality industry. "These experiences were very, very powerful," said Frazier, now senior vice president of community affairs for Highmark Health in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "I kept thinking, imagine how great it would be if we were able to connect to other groups like this in our field across the country."

His SMH friends Burkeen and Watts, who had just been elected president of SMH for the following year, agreed. In fact, Burkeen had already started mulling

The four founders of NSMH at their first national conference in 1990 and at the twenty-fifth national conference in 2014



over the idea of a weekend conference to jumpstart networks with clubs from other universities. Joining forces and bringing Wint on board, the planners soon found that they were not alone in their endeavor.

“We were somewhat myopic when we started in on this national conference,” Watts admitted. “We were just thinking, let’s bring some students together and we’ll hang out and talk about starting in the industry. But this being Cornell, the higher-ups were always thinking four or five steps ahead, and they told us that this must be done extremely well. They really helped put the Cornell brand and spirit on what we were about to do.”

But the four soon bumped up against a problem: not one of the 104 hospitality programs that Burkeen contacted over the summer sponsored a minority organization on campus.

While some schools simply lacked the diversity to achieve a critical mass, others had minority students but no special groups dedicated to them. “Often they did not understand why something like that was necessary in the first place,” said Burkeen, now director of organizational

effectiveness at ConAgra Foods in Naperville, Illinois. “There were some schools that were just against the idea, because they were uncomfortable with minority folks getting together,” Frazier added. “We continued to move forward and determined that the conference would be that much more important for people to attend.”

Among their most important early supporters was Yariela Kerr-Donovan ’89, MPS ’00, herself a recent graduate who was working as director of minority programs and served as the quartet’s advisor. “I was very proud of the students,” she said. “They were really doing the heavy lifting. Of course they had our support, from faculty and staff alike, but nothing was imposed upon this organization. Truly every aspect of it was decisions led by these four.”

Thus buoyed, they pulled off what would be the first of many annual conferences

to come. Sponsored by such businesses as Marriott, the Four Seasons, and Harvey Hotels, the first conference, themed “Unity: A Key to Success,” took place at Cornell and attracted 75 participants representing seventeen schools from as far away as Las Vegas.

“The conference was a terrific success,” the organizers concluded in *The Bulletin*—despite the fact that they had lost their guest accommodations to another event at the last minute. Forced to improvise, they moved rollaway beds into their own dorm rooms, and the personal nature of their hospitality turned an impediment into an advantage. “The visiting students really got to be part of the campus for those couple of days and build strong relationships,” Frazier said. Those bonds formed the foundation for a national organization.

Going national

A planning team separate from SMH focused on structuring the nascent organization, which they began to call the National Society of Minority Hoteliers. For the time being, its leadership would remain at Cornell. “We knew how difficult it was communicating right on campus, let alone more broadly across the country,”

Frazier explained. “This was before internet and email.”

They looked to the large, well established National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) as a model for NSMH’s constitution and bylaws. “NSBE has always kind of been our big brother,” said Watts. In fact, a former NSBE national chair, along with several industry leaders, formed an advisory committee to NSMH, which acquired 501(c)(3) legal status and held its third conference in 1992 as a constitutional convention.

Over 130 students representing 27 universities attended to ratify the organization’s framework and to form the first dozen chapters, at schools including Howard, Michigan State, Chicago State, Morris Brown College, and the University of Maryland.

With the fourth conference, finally, NSMH completed its bid to go national, electing a board from across its membership, not only from Cornell. NSMH has since grown into a professionally managed organization with headquarters in Chesterfield, Virginia.

NSMH today

While the annual conferences—today held at conference centers and often attended by over a thousand participants—are the highlight of the year, it is the local chapters that form the foundation of NSMH. Here, students find a home away from home, organize local events, and begin to hone their leadership skills. They also meet at regional conferences held each year in the fall.

NSMH requires all chapters to produce several types of events. Every NSMH chapter hosts Hospitality Week, which celebrates and brings awareness to the hospitality industry, and the Pre-College Outreach Program, which promotes the value of secondary education among high-school students. As partial fulfillment of their community service requirement, Cornell’s NSMHers put together the annual Hilltop Jamboree, a family-friendly carnival held in Barton Hall, and donate the proceeds to charity.

Stacy Delapenha ’14 joined the Cornell chapter of NSMH as a freshman and has been active, both locally and on the national board, ever since. “I volunteered to be one of the freshman representatives, and [then-chapter president] Brea Gardner ’11 asked us to put together a presentation for one of our founders, Evan Frazier,” she said. “After that, Brea said, ‘You did that well; why don’t you take charge of the NSMH newsletter?’ So I did, having no prior experience with publications. Our chapter ended up winning Newsletter of the Year at the conference! That really showed me my capabilities. Throughout my time in NSMH I’ve been able to learn more and more about myself, which has given me the confidence to do other things.

“At NSMH, there were people like me, other people of color who had similar experiences,” she continued. “I got this family feeling, and I felt like these were people I’d be comfortable around and could talk to.”



Michael Burkeen '92

In addition to that vital sense of belonging, NSMH is fulfilling the original SMH vision of helping underrepresented minority students form connections and relationships with alumni and other supporters in key positions within the hospitality industry. The organization's Hospitality Industry Professional Extension, or HIPE, for example, has been created to provide an online community for industry professionals "with a focus on the continued advancement, retention, and recruitment of minorities within the hospitality industry," according to the NSMH website. "Corporations look to NSMH as a hub to which they can go and from which they can pull the best and brightest students in hospitality education right now," said Watts.

By advancing to the seventeen-member national board as programs director during her junior and senior years, Delapenha was able to take advantage of the special training given to NSMH's national

leaders. In addition to an annual leadership retreat, where officers practice skills such as public speaking, they benefit from the constant feedback of a four-member advisory board composed of David Corsun '83, MS '96 PhD '99, associate professor and director of the hospitality school at the University of Denver; Laura Kornegay-Gilham '96, vice president of people strategies at Club Corp; Janice Taylor, manager of human resources for Delta Dental Insurance Company; and Orr Rivero, a regional vice president of human resources at Hilton Worldwide.

The national advisory board was put in place early in NSMH's development to address a serious concern among the founders. "We were worried that, because the leadership of the organization changes every year, it would always be taking two steps forward, one step back,"



Evan Frazier '92

Ahmed Sanjide

Burkeen said. "Plus, you've got nineteen- to 21-year-olds handling a huge budget. It's very easy to make poor decisions." "We provide institutional memory for decisions being considered," Corsun explained. "We can say, 'That's been tried; this is what happened.' But ultimately it's up to the students on the board to make decisions." In addition, a small team around executive director LaCresha Lightfoot-Newman and a management company that handles logistics and finances keep NSMH on a steady path.

The NSMH board members appreciate this guidance from their elders. "The advisory board members really take care of us," said Delapenha. "They mold and develop us, trying to take us to the next level, because at the end of the day, we're representing the organization. Aside from that, they just want to make sure that we're entering the industry in the best way possible."

Network

Thus groomed for leadership, national board officers are particularly sought-after by potential employers. The two years that William Avitia '05 spent on the NSMH board helped him land his first job at Starwood, where today he is director of human resources at the St. Regis Aspen Resort. "I went to all the conferences at Cornell and NSMH and built rapport with the recruiters," he said. "But I feel that I was able to stand out more through NSMH, where I had the opportunity to shine. I don't think I was offered any jobs through Cornell career fairs—it was all done through NSMH."

Now Avitia himself attends the national conference's career fair as a recruiter for Starwood—a sign that NSMH has matured enough to bring its alumni full-circle.

Especially in its earliest days, NSMH was able to share the Cornell advantage with its members from other, smaller schools. "Cornell was always very effective at

getting employers to come to Cornell to recruit, whereas they wouldn't be going to all the 130 colleges and universities that were out there at the time," said Frazier. "By connecting to NSMH, they opened an opportunity for their students to get interviews, summer jobs, permanent placement jobs. NSMH became an important career enhancer through its career fairs, and a very efficient way to recruit."

"I would like to think that the programs, the leadership preparation that students get as part of NSMH, is helping to change the perceptions of minority graduates entering the industry," said Burkeen.

NSMH's professional training has had what Corsun called a "smoothing effect" between better prepared Hoteliers and students at some other schools that do not always have the same level of resources.

“Tapping into the resources of the alumni is one of the biggest opportunities NSMH offers at Cornell and nationally,” said Jelissa Toro '08, a former board member now working as director of revenue management at the Crowne Plaza Times Square Manhattan Hotel. “Alumni should be even more involved by contributing financially and offering mentoring, job shadowing, guest speaking, and internship opportunities.”

Recently, NSMH has been ramping up its efforts to keep alumni in its fold once they graduate. Although HIPE has always been written into the bylaws, the national board only last year appointed a two-year alumni board to oversee it, and alumni leaders have begun organizing happy hours and other outings as part of growing city networks in major urban areas across the country.

Through these efforts, Urquhart hopes, the founders' dream will continue to flourish. “It's building a ladder that's ideal for any group if you want it to progress,” she said. “You need people at the top to help those coming up. That's the long-term vision, having people at different levels who can help.”

Though the sense among many older and younger alumni is that even more can be done, the network is already poised to assist its members with everything from career advice and job leads to help with apartment hunting in a new city.

Three-year national board member Phillip Cooper '10, for example, was able to turn to Burkeen with questions about graduate school. “Some of the older members I've come in contact with, they've never been shy about reaching out or responding to me, even though I know they're busy,” he said, adding that he would never have known about the most recent job he applied for had it not been for another NSMH member looking out for him and alerting him to it.

The ever-growing web of relationships extends well beyond the professional realm. “NSMH has been my life,” said Kornegay, who has never had to apply for a job, thanks to connections made through the organization. “It has given me my friends from college and literally every single job I've gotten in eighteen years.”

Surely it cannot hurt Kornegay's enthusiasm for NSMH that she also met her husband through the organization. “That's the best argument,” she laughed. “I truly attribute my personal happiness—from my best friends to my husband, and now my family—to NSMH.”

Mingling with the generations of NSMH members that followed in their footsteps at the twenty-fifth annual conference, the founders were delighted and deeply touched to hear this. “I had several students come up to me at the twenty-fifth conference to say, ‘Thank you for starting this organization,’ or ‘It changed my

life,” said Urquhart, a communications consultant in Pelham, New York. “It's a bit heady for someone to say something like that, but founding the organization was definitely a highlight of my life, and the fact that I could help somebody that much means that all the hard work was really worth it.”

“I can hardly explain the gratification that you feel,” Watts added. “To hear students talking about how NSMH and their chapter were there to pick them up when they were down, to see the spirit of what was happening in SMH at Cornell 25 years ago now happening nationally at all of these schools—that was a true blessing.”



Whitney Wilson '12 enjoys a networking breakfast at the national conference.

Curtis Ferguson



The Cornell contingent at the 2014 national conference. National advisory board member David Corsun '83, MS '96, PhD '99 is at lower right. Advisory board member Laura Kornegay-Gilham '96 is third from right in the second row.