TNT to ADPi at William Jewell College

By Jill Powers

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A group of seven young women in their late teens and early twenties sit casually in the living room of Marjorie Reed’s family home one evening in April of 1922, laughing and talking about their days and their classes at William Jewell College. Anna mentions that she enjoyed the latest reading from English class while Blanche teases Helen about a comment she made in history class that morning. Ernestine stands, brushing down the fabric of her light blue skirt which swishes around her mid-calves, and walks to the window to open it, letting in a cool spring breeze from the outside Liberty air. Nancy asks Lucy if she plans to run for queen in the upcoming Tatler Revue competition. At the mention of these words, the other women lunge their heads toward the two girls and lean in to begin hushed gossip about whom the other contestants will be, their eyes wide and their lips dancing from smirks to smiles between words. After a few minutes, Ernestine clears her throat and her friends give her their attention:

“Congratulations, ladies, on our establishment as TNT sorority on William Jewell’s campus.”
These seven women, Ernestine Dow, Anna Jane Shelton, Blanche McCornas, Helen Iglehart, Lucille Hall, Marjorie Reed, and Nancy Lawson, were the founders of William Jewell College’s second local sorority, TNT, which would later become Gamma Nu Chapter of the International Sorority, Alpha Delta Pi. Before these young women had even entered the College as “co-eds,” they began organizing their club between classes at Liberty High School. They hid and whispered the secret details of their sorority among themselves without ever leaving a written trace so well that today, no one truly knows the meaning behind the letters they chose as their name; however, the letters may in fact stand for trinitrotoluene, the explosive commonly known today by the same initials.

This explosive was often used during World War I, and for these young women whose brothers and neighbors became soldiers, the initials TNT represented injuries, lost lives, and memories of difficult times. Memories like these motivated the founders to organize themselves into a group with the goal to positively influence the community while pursuing higher education for themselves. In later years, TNT members supported the Red Cross by volunteering at the local hospital in Excelsior Springs, providing aid to the hurt and sick with the courage and passion that was so highly valued by their founders. The 1940s brought upon them World War II, and TNTs lost no time in stepping up to offer their services. In 1940, the sorority’s women hosted a Bridge Benefit to support the United Service Organizations. After an evening of playing cards, laughter, and prizes, TNT had raised $35 dollars for America’s troops thanks to the attendance and support of alumnae and other Liberty women who loved to help the sorority in its endeavors, and loved to see the shining, energetic faces of the young ladies as they pursued their philanthropic passion.
Besides a giving spirit, every good sorority woman, including the TNTs, has to know how to have fun. Among the last members of TNT, who became the first members of Alpha Delta Pi, Gamma Nu, there were two campus queens who had charmed their fellow students with endless smiles, flowing curls, and grace in every movement during Homecoming and the annual Tatler Revue competition, which supported the College’s yearbook. Every year, the girls held a Mother’s Day Luncheon, providing enjoyment for themselves, their birth mothers, and the mother’s who came before them as TNTs. The Mother’s Day celebration of 1944 found the women at the Kansas City Women’s Club among playful decorations of shoes, laces, and house ware to represent the nursery rhyme theme of “The Old Woman Who Lived in the Shoe.”

William Jewell’s other student organizations and honor societies would have suffered without the membership of many TNTs. In 1949 alone, at least three or four of these women demonstrated their dramatic nature by starring in the theatre’s productions. Dorothy Ray and Betty Stone were honored for their dedication to academics and achievement in both the Panaegis women’s honor society and the Who’s Who of college students. Others were involved in the editorial staff of the College’s student newspaper, the William Jewell Student, and the annual yearbook, the Tatler. From the 1930’s until they became ADPi in 1949, TNT women printed the TNT Bulletin at least once a year, sharing all of their activities and endeavors with their alumnae and the community. Miss Melva Dean Vaughn used both her creativity and her own experiences to write a poem about “The Pledge of TNT” who “made a lot of whooppee,” which was published in the May 1938 issue of the Bulletin.

After twenty-six years as TNT on William Jewell’s campus, April 1949 brought the chapter’s decision to become the 74th chapter of the first secret society for women, Alpha Delta Pi. No sorority could have fit the already-established chapter any better; both organizations
shared a desire to better the world and the courage to take the steps to do so. Alpha Delta Pi women from nearby chapters and the international Grand Council gathered to transition the TNT members from their original three-point pin to the four-pointed diamond of ADPi. On Saturday, April 23, thirty-six TNTs became active ADPis within the walls of the Liberty Presbyterian Church, and twenty-seven past members were initiated as alumnae of the original sorority. The Grand President of Alpha Delta Pi, Maxine Blake, granted a smiling and shaking Ercell Head, first president of Gamma Nu chapter, with a charter and sacred gavel. The members watched each other through tears of joy as they sang first *Happy Memories*, their favorite song as TNTs, then *I Love The Pin*, a beloved song of ADPi. William Jewell’s other sororities and fraternities brought gifts to the banquet held in welcome of the newest addition to the campus. The floral decorations for the banquet honored the violet, which was held as a symbol of both TNT and ADPi, as well as blue and white carnations that represented ADPi’s colors.

Today, Gamma Nu Chapter of Alpha Delta Pi still strives to uphold the values and characteristics that would make their founding members, both of ADPi and TNT, proud to call them their sisters. No matter what other changes occur in the world, the importance of integrity and service to humanity will never fade.
Works Cited


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