

## Zulu District preparing youth for leadership

Written by Maya Beecham  
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African American boys are in a single-file line and stand focused, uniformed, and serious. They are in the middle of a Cub Scouts flag ceremony in their regular meeting place at Harvest Preparatory School in North Minneapolis. The boys, ranging in age from 6 to 10, are a part of Cub Scouts Pack 694 under the Zulu District, in the Northern Star Council of Boy Scouts of America. A quick glance of the room's periphery shows a handful of supportive men and women, including parents and relatives who encourage the boys to live by principles of the organization. By participation, each Cub Scout universally pledges, "I promise to live my best, to do my duty to God and my country, to other people, and to obey the Law of the Pack."

Pack 694, led by Cub Master Jonathan Jones, is a new and burgeoning group that started in September 2009. The Pack is divided into groups based on age, grade, and achievement. Tiger Cubs are 1st graders, Wolf Cubs are 2nd graders, Bear Cubs are 3rd graders, and Webelos Scouts are 4th and 5th graders. Jones said the boys learn the, "African history specifically of the Zulu Nation and how some of the history is connected to the whole aspect of development of young boys into males." Various meetings and activities are structured around:

- Helping build character and encouraging spiritual growth.
- Developing habits and attitudes of good citizenship.
- Encouraging good sportsmanship and pride in growing strong in mind and body.
- Improving understanding within the family.
- Strengthening the ability to get along with other boys and respect other people.
- Fostering a sense of personal achievement by developing new interests and skills.
- Showing how to be helpful and to do one's best.
- Preparing them to become Boy Scouts

This pack is an example of efforts made by Boy Scouts of America to fill a void by diversifying its constituency, Jones said, "The Zulu District is a district that is specifically designed to attract African Americans, primarily African American boys to scouting. They found a few years back, doing research, that there was a lot of disparity within scouting and scouting was not reaching out as much as it could to African American males. So they designed the Zulu District with that specific purpose."

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. has collaborated with Boy Scouts of America for nearly 30 years in a strong alliance to realize the goal of developing scouting units in urban communities and promote the organizations aligning principles of community, values, and leadership. The Alpha

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Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. national website notes that Alpha Chapters and Brothers actively work to charter scout units; serve as direct, council, regional and national leaders; refer promising and credible individuals for careers as volunteer and professional leaders in the Scouting program; and develop special relationships and programs in conjunction with established units and levels of leadership.

Jones, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., knew that working with Cub Scouts was the perfect opportunity for him to explore. "I am a classroom teacher and I love working with kids. What attracted me is that I definitely saw and knew that there were a lot of opportunities within scouting that would be very beneficial to young Black males, specifically. Working with youth, that's the real draw for me. I love planning activities with my den leaders, but I love more, sitting down and doing activities with the kids."

Cub Scouts is dependent on the active engagement of families, in order for students to advance through the ranks and to help provide structure to meetings and activities throughout the year. Some parents volunteer to take pictures and bring snacks. There are also parents who serve as den leaders and receive training similar to trainings for teachers. Den leaders are trained in the EDGE, an instructional and empowering approach that stands for explain, demonstrate, guide and enable. Additionally, the training provides information on safety and abuse reporting information.

Floyd Ballentine, parent to six-year-old Cub Scout Dallas, serves as a den leader. When Ballentine learned of Pack 694 starting at his son's school, he made a point to get him registered because he recalled the values instilled in his life when he served as a Cub Scout. "Yes I was a Cub Scout. I started at seven. I was in there from ages 7 to 9. When I went through Cub Scouts it was down in Minneapolis in the projects and it was under Cub Master Louise James, an elderly woman who put a lot of passion into what she did. We did a lot of things within the community like cleaned up, picked up trash, and just prided our community."

Ballentine credits Cub Scouts for part of his success as an adult. Despite the influx of violence and drugs in the neighborhood he grew up in, his mother made sure to keep him active and surrounded by positive role models. Now as a professional commercial pilot, Ballentine wants to be a role model to other young boys. "The reason why I became a den leader and the reason I want my boy to be in Cub Scouts is it's time for me to give back. And I think a lot of kids nowadays need a positive influence. They just need the presence of someone being positive, because there is so much negative happening over in Minneapolis. If they see men of color being positive and being good role models I think it will have a great impact on their lives and they will have a better chance of being successful as they get older."

Dallas couldn't be more thrilled about being a Cub Scout. Ballentine said, "he loves it. Jonathan has let him do the flag ceremony three times and he feels like he works for the President of the United States. He runs home and tells mom and younger brother, students at school and even at church ...he tells people about what he did in the flag ceremony. He is very excited about being a Cub Scout."

Some of the students were brought to Cub Scouts without knowing fully what to expect, but

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once they became involved with activities they were sold. Brian Graves, Sr., a single father of two children, commits to driving from work in St. Paul, to home in Albertville, to Cub Scout meetings in North Minneapolis. He makes sure his son, Brian Graves, Jr., is an active participant in the meetings twice a month. Graves said, "I brought my boy here because he doesn't get a lot of interaction with little boys his age and particularly with his cultural background. And so I wanted to expose him to an atmosphere where he wouldn't be the only one that looks like him plus he is learning and growing at the same time. I felt this would be a good opportunity and so far he really enjoys it."

While the organization is making efforts to recruit African American males, at times it can be attached to the stigma of being for Caucasian boys only. Jones attributes this to a, "fear factor of being unknown. There is a perception sometimes that Boy Scouts is not for African Americans but people learn that this is not true. Once they go camping they are more than nine times out of ten hooked. And the main reason is because Cub Scouts provides very engaging activities that are fun, capture the kid's imagination, and capture the things that they are interested in. And then on top of that it provides learning opportunities that are fun for the kids. Once they experience it they want it more. I feel Black youth in general need exposure to a variety of opportunities to become more successful. Just having opportunities for more things they may not necessarily be exposed to."

Malik Bush is a den leader and father of eight-year-old twin boys Angelo and Orlando and five-year-old Wisdom who occasionally tags along for Cub Scout meetings. Bush believes his duties along with other parent volunteers, involves developing young boys to become respectable citizens for a lifetime. Bush said, "one of the big things we want to stress to people is that this is not aftercare, it's not daycare, it's not hanging out with the kids, it's a family event. It helps develop the boys into the men who we want them to be. And I think for me, probably the biggest thing is I want to hear them say when they are 35-years-old and someone is marveling at their capability of doing something, they will say I learned to do that in scouts. And that's what I really look forward to."

For more information on the Zulu District, in the Northern Star Council of Boy Scouts of America, visit <http://zulu.nsbsa.org/>.