



SOME MEMBERS — including author Lawrence Otis Graham (top row, center) — of the exclusive Sigma Pi Phi fraternity, also known as the Boule, during a black-tie affair in 1996. PERMISSION BY LAWRENCE OTIS GRAHAM

# The Boule: Achievers only

By DAVID NOONAN

Daily News Staff Writer

For author Lawrence Otis Graham, being initiated into Sigma Pi Phi, a low-profile, high-prestige fraternity of black professionals known as the Boule, had an unexpected twist.

"It gave me the sense of what it must feel like to be born into a powerful white family in America," Graham said of the black-tie ceremony four years ago at the Williams Club on the upper East Side.

Graham writes about the Boule and other elite black organizations in his new book, "Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class."

"I was surrounded by these accomplished, well-educated and powerful black men who were very comfortable with their success," he said.

Founded as a forum for scholarship and companionship in 1904 in Philadelphia by Dr. Henry Minton and a handful of other black physicians, the Boule (pronounced *bou-lay*, from a Greek word meaning "council of noblemen") has counted among its members many of the most prominent and accomplished African-American men of this century, including W.E.B. Du Bois, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Andrew Young, not to mention hundreds of doctors, lawyers, professors, ministers and businessmen.

At the same time, it has remained one of the best-kept secrets in the black community. "I was selected to belong to it, and I didn't know that it existed," said the Rev. Calvin Pressley, a Methodist minister in New York who is the group's executive director.

As the Boule emerges from its cloistered past, many members have become sensitive to its image in the larger black community. There are 3,700 members nationwide in 106 local chapters, known as subordinate Boules. There are four such chapters in the New York City area — one in Manhattan, one in Westchester, one in northern New Jersey, and one covering

Brooklyn and Long Island — with about 200 members.

The local membership rolls include former Mayor David Dinkins; Dr. Harry Delany, chief of surgery at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine; Edward Lewis, founder of Essence magazine; Harold Doley, the first black person to own a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, and Hugh Price, president and chief executive of the National Urban League.

Originally created by men locked out of social and professional groups by segregation, the Boule has evolved into a repository of power, influence and wealth that might well be unmatched by any other fraternal organization in the country, black or white.

"Its purpose is to bring together men of distinction, of well-documented professional and intellectual achievement,"

## A support system born of exclusion

said Grand Sire Archon, or National President Eddie Williams, who also is president of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington. Membership is by invitation only, and candidates often do not know they are being considered.

The avowedly apolitical Bou-

le is dedicated primarily to intellectual and social pursuits — including monthly lectures and formal Christmas parties at the Waldorf-Astoria — but the organization is a web of high-powered professional and political connections.

Both Dinkins and former Virginia Gov. Douglas Wilder have called on their fellow Boule members for support in their political campaigns.

Despite the Boule's remarkable roster, some members question the idea that they constitute a black elite.

"I don't know how you characterize 'elite,'" said attorney Godfrey Murrain, secretary of the Manhattan chapter. "If somebody has been successful and maybe gained a certain amount of wealth, is he elite or not? Some people go into who your mother and father were and what they did and everything else. But does that make you elite? I don't know. My father was a chauffeur, and I've been successful. Does that make me elite?"

"I wouldn't say that the Boule is the most elite organiza-

tion," Price said. "There are hundreds of thousands of extraordinarily successful African-Americans in this country. Some of them belong to the Boule; some of them belong to other organizations and some belong to no organizations."

After decades as an organization, the Boule began to change in the 1960s.

"There started to be internal pressure that maybe they should do a little more than socialize," Pressley said. "There were giants within the organization, like Wiley Branton [the principal lawyer on the civil rights case that desegregated the Little Rock, Ark., public schools in 1957], guys on the cutting edge of the social change."

In the wake of the upheavals of the 1960s, a variety of social action programs were initiated by the chapters, many involving mentorship programs at local schools. Later, the Boule Foundation was created to award scholarships and to provide funding to organizations like the NAACP.

Last year, the Boule took a rare public stance when it moved its bi-annual national convention to Seattle from San Diego to protest the passage in California of Proposition 209, which put an end to affirmative-action programs in state and local government.

Today, under the leadership of Williams and his predecessor, Anthony Hall Jr., the Boule has developed a more defined approach to social issues. Though he took "some flak and heat from some of the old-timers" for his position, Williams spearheaded the creation this year of a public-policy committee within the Boule.

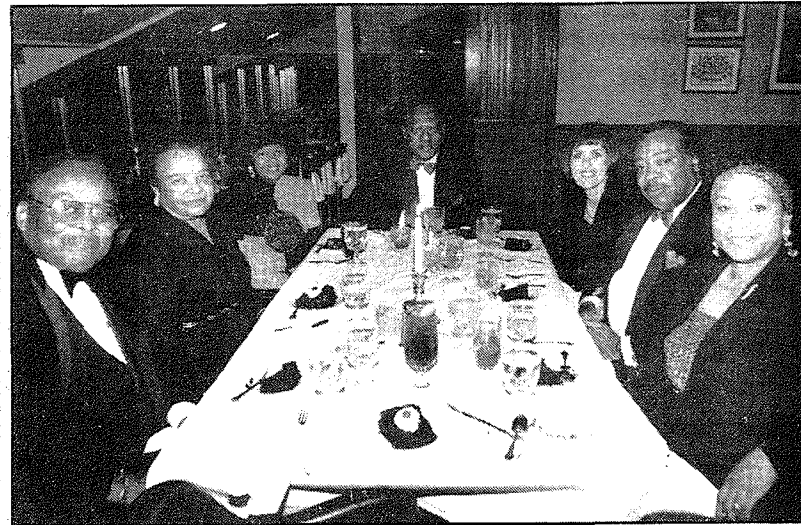
"It is important for the members to work through other organizations they belong to, like the NAACP," Williams said. "But it is also very important that we not be seen as being irrelevant to some of the major tides and developments in the black community."



FOUNDERS: (From left) Drs. Richard Warrick, Henry Minton, Algernon Jackson and Edwin Howard wanted a forum for scholarship and companionship, and founded the Boule in 1904 in Philadelphia. FROM "THE HISTORY OF SIGMA PI PHI"

# Eta Boule Hosts 80th Anniversary Dinner

The Eta Boule Chapter of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity held its 80th anniversary dinner at the Stadium Club Saturday, November 14. Sigma Pi Phi is the oldest African-American fraternity in the country founded in 1904. The Eta Boule Chapter was founded in 1912.



The American's camera caught (from left) Chuck Brasfield Jr; Erma Gentry; Belma Givens; Henry Givens, president of Harris-Stowe College; Jennifer Platt; Julius Hunter, KMOV news anchor; and Phyllis Savage enjoying their dessert.



Shelia Williams, left, John Gladney and Carol Williams shared a light conversation at the dinner.



(From left) Clyde and Maizie Orr; Adele Stafford, Jane Irwin, Jacquelyn Creighton, Ladorn Creighton and Ted Savage, director of target marketing for the St. Louis Cardinals all stop for a quick photo opp!



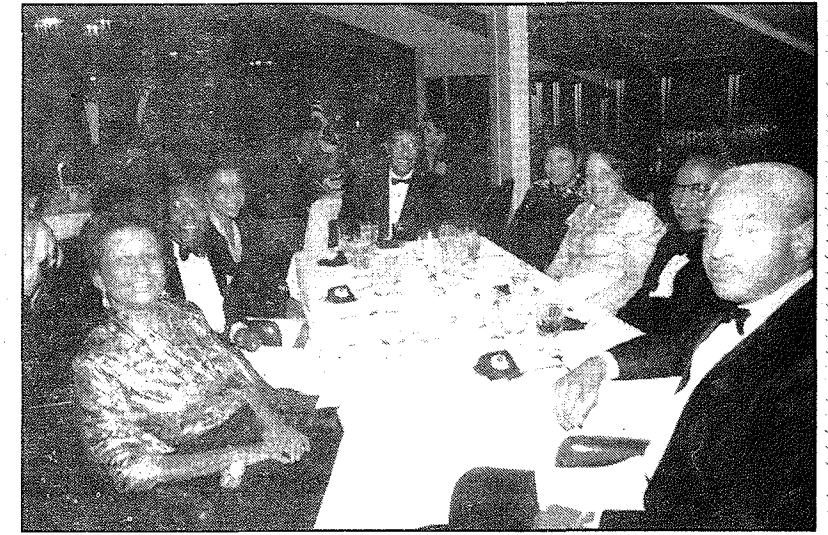
Judge Dan Tillman, left, chats with Clarice Gladney, Mary Ann Tillman (his wife) and Jerome Williams.



From left: Jim Buford, president of the Metropolitan St. Louis Urban League; Karen Pinkston; Helen Buford; Jim Trice; Anita Bond; Gloria Trice; and Les Bond Sr.



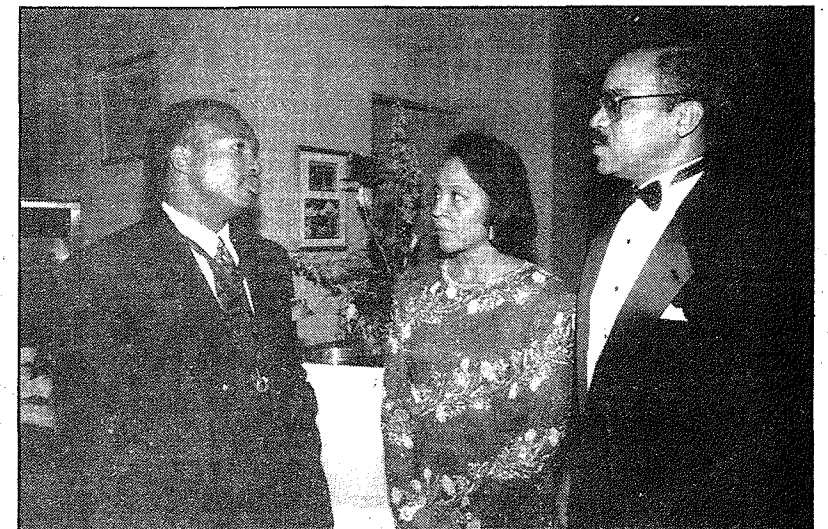
Luther Forest and Cynthia and Ron Thompson were among the guests attending the formal dinner



Guests spotted enjoying the evening are (from left) Lillie Young; Mr. and Mrs. Simmons; Rufus Young; Savannah Young; Ruth Washington; Walter Washington and Ira Young.



(From left) Jonathan Reed; Denise Lombard; Cheryl Young; Les Bond Jr; Bettye Reed and Bill Young engaged in spirited conversation.



Ron Carter, left, director of the evening's musical entertainment, pauses with



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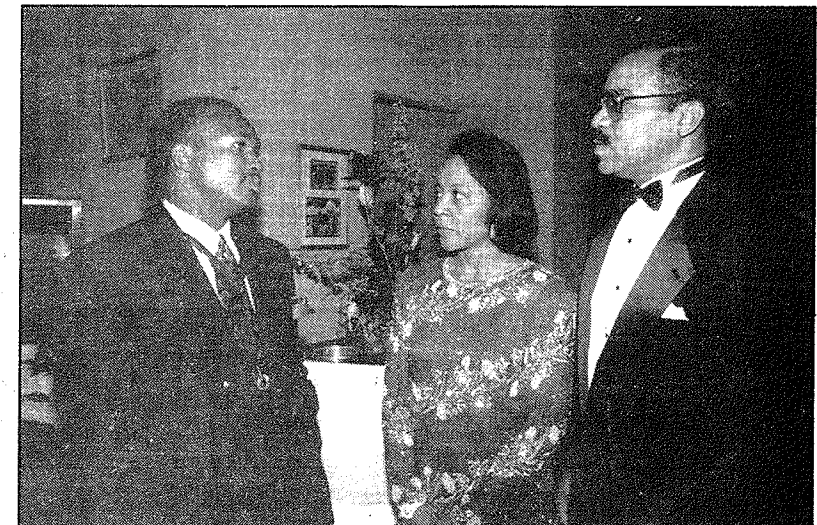
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Ron Carter, left, director of the evening's musical entertainment, pauses with Joyce and David Price at the dinner anniversary.