



History

Delta House, Incorporated

The Delta Life Development Center

Delta House, Incorporated, located in Columbia, South Carolina, stands as a symbol of resilience, community, and empowerment. Its origins are deeply rooted in the fight for civil rights and education, serving as a beacon for African American women and their allies who sought to transform their communities through service, leadership, and advocacy.

Establishing a Delta House facility was an unwavering vision of members of the Columbia (SC) Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, a national African American sorority founded in 1913 at Howard University. The sorority was built on the principles of sisterhood, service, and scholarship, and quickly became a leading voice in the civil rights movement, nationally. As a part of this national effort, the members of Columbia Alumnae sought to own a facility that would allow them to organize, educate, and uplift African Americans in the face of systemic racism and segregation.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Columbia, like many Southern cities, was at the center of the civil rights struggle. Columbia Alumnae Chapter members met in members' homes in the city which became meeting places for African American women leaders, educators, and activists who worked tirelessly to combat the injustices of Jim Crow laws, voter suppression, and educational inequality.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Columbia Alumnae members engaged in voter registration drives, economic empowerment programs, and educational initiatives. They organized forums, workshops, and rallies aimed at empowering African Americans to fight for their rights. In addition, the national and local members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. played a pivotal role in supporting the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which helped dismantle the legal framework of racial discrimination. Members were involved in local efforts to desegregate local schools and public facilities, while a vision of a Delta House facility continued to grow in the hearts and minds of its members.

To that end by the mid-1970s, the Delta House Finance Committee presented "*The Team Concept*" along with members of the executive board to the chapter membership. The concept was to delegate members of the chapter to serve as team leaders whose primary duty was to reach every Delta in the Columbia area, encouraging them to contribute to the purchase of a house. Twenty-two teams, each bearing the name of a founder, were formed. A magazine subscription campaign was the major fundraising project from which one thousand dollars was returned to the subscribers in the community. Sorors Rosena Lucas and Betty J. Cunningham chaired the Finance Committee and the Fund-Raising Committee, respectively. During that time, the monthly attendance of members increased exponentially, making it necessary to move the meeting place to larger accommodation.

Consequently, Arrington Manor, a high-rise complex for senior citizens and citizens with disabilities, was chosen as the new meeting place and provided the opportunity for the chapter to learn about the problems and needs of the elderly. This association developed and from it the residents became the "adoptees" for community activities. Over forty years later, this association has evolved into a yearly activity with Columbia (SC)

Alumnae Chapter members and residents of all the high-rise complexes in the city under the auspices of the Columbia Housing Authority.

In 1979, the first Delta House located at 2308 Haskell Avenue was purchased by members of the Columbia (SC) Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. The vision to provide a meeting place to offer programs and services that would impact the lives of people in nearby communities was fulfilled. The Delta House was in the vicinity of several schools, a home for senior citizens on fixed incomes, near stores, churches, and bus lines. Several programs for children were operated out of The Delta House. The SC Arts Commission funded a summer “Children Workshop Theater” program. Volunteers staffed the program, and the children received lunch and snacks. The grand finale was a theatrical production presented by the children in the auditorium of Carver Elementary, a local community school.

On February 20, 1980, Delta House, Incorporated was chartered by the SC Office of the Secretary of State and recognized by the United States Internal Revenue Service as a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization. Subsequently, The Delta House property was deeded to Delta House, Incorporated. In April 1982, Delta House, Incorporated, named the facility the Life Development Center (LDC).

The members of the Columbia chapter began offering tutoring, scholarship programs, and mentoring for African American youth, particularly young girls, encouraging them to pursue higher education and careers in fields where they were traditionally underrepresented. The facility became known as a place of learning and inspiration, with its members continuing to serve as role models in the community.

March 30, 1985, was a most significant day in the history of Columbia (SC) Alumnae Chapter: the burning of the Delta House mortgage. Soror Lillian Martin, of the Housing Committee presented a plaque with the names of all members who had fulfilled their financial pledges. A commemorative march from the Delta House to Benedict College followed the Dedication Ceremony.

In the years following its establishment, the Development Life Center became a hub for educational programs, vocational training, and health initiatives aimed at improving the lives of underserved African Americans in Columbia. Women, children, and families benefited from workshops on literacy, financial planning, and leadership development. For many residents, the LDC was a haven—a place where opportunities flourished in an environment grounded in Black heritage, dignity, and self-determination.

As membership increased in the Columbia (SC) Alumnae Chapter and the community outreach grew, it became obvious to all that the chapter had outgrown the Development Life Center on Haskell Avenue.

Under the direction of Soror Rosena Lucas, the chapter established the following goals:

- 1) Seek buyers for the Haskell Avenue property.
- 2) Search suitable property for the chapter to purchase to build a new Delta House.
- 3) Build a new Delta House.

Whereas on February 24, 1992, the Haskell Avenue property was sold for \$25,000. On June 27, 1992, a new property with 3.5 acres and an existing house was purchased at a cost of \$50,000 at 5307 Fairfield Road. An architect was hired to draw up renovations plans for the existing facility to become the LDC. Notably, each of the goals was achieved, except number three.

The chapter reaffirmed its commitment and support to Delta House, Inc. to build the proposed Life Development Center. During the month of October, a fund-raising community event, the Fall Round-Up, was held at the LDC on Fairfield Road. The activities were centered around a Halloween theme. Additionally, the committee coordinated participation in the city's local Autumfest which netted several hundred dollars. During Founders Day activities, Delta House, Inc. gave recognition and awards to team leaders and sorors meeting their goals and commitments.

Phase II of Delta House, Inc. began with the 1994-95 sorority year. This phase included: the liquidation of the balance due (\$27,000) on the facility and acreage at the Fairfield Road site; fund-raising to cover the overall projected cost of around \$300,000 in addition to approximately \$85,000 needed to refurbish the existing structure. Included in this phase were means to obtain grant funds, feasibility of annexation to the city, and uses of the Life Development Center to best serve the community. Soror Susan Williams-Richardson served as legal advisor during acquisition of the property.

A pride and joy of the Columbia (SC) Alumnae Chapter was the establishment of the *Life Development Center* renamed *The Delta Life Development Center*. In 1996 there was a grand opening with a ribbon cutting ceremony that included local and state public officials and a community parade. The location provided the opportunity to serve even larger communities in the county. Spacious rooms and adequate outside spaces to accommodate parking as well as special outdoors events.

The December 14, 1996, chapter meeting was the first one held in the facility. Soror Vivian Nelson, Delta House President and Sorors Rosena Lucas and Lillian Marting were recognized by Chapter President, Jessie Byrd as being the driving forces in making the facility a reality.

Over the years, *The Delta Life Development Center* has been used to host *Homework Centers* for at-risk children in the surrounding neighborhoods. During the summer, the DLDC is a distribution site for the SC Department of Social Services Food and Nutrition Voucher Program. Volunteers assist seniors with the application process. Senior citizens on fixed incomes use the vouchers to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Local farmers set up in the parking lot to make it convenient for the seniors to shop.

The center has been the site of *Expungement Workshops* for people who needed help in getting their criminal records expunged. The Richland County Office of the Solicitor provided facilitators for these workshops. For the past several years, the DLDC has served as a site for a one-day community *Flu Shot Clinic* in collaboration with Walgreens Drug stores. Volunteers who are licensed pharmacists, RNs and LPNs administer the flu shots.

The DLDC has served as a public venue for local artists to share their skills and talents, cultural events, as well as a place for local, county, and state candidates to share their platforms. Non-profit community groups use the facility at no cost. For a nominal fee, community residents can rent the DLDC for retirement and graduation celebrations, wedding receptions, and meetings.

In May 2015 DLDC was the site for a *Stop Human Trafficking* workshop. Delta House Inc., the SC State Head Start Collaboration Office, the Social Action Committee of the Columbia (SC) Alumnae Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the Region IV Office of Children & Family Services, along with other federal, state, and local agencies partnered to sponsor this workshop.

Delta House, Inc. has often partnered with the Columbia (SC) Alumnae Chapter to provide meeting spaces and resources for public service events such as a Community Health Fair for medical screenings and information about maintaining good health. Another flagship project was the *Financial Literacy Bootcamp for Youth*, a

summer financial awareness program with guest speakers, modules, simulations, and fun activities designed to teach 12–14-year-olds about managing finances.

Another generous partner was with the Booker T. Washington Foundation Alumni Association. This organization has supported Delta House Inc.'s initiatives financially as well as providing volunteers to work with projects such as the *Easter Food Baskets and Food Cards Give Away* project. This initiative helped fill the void of students not having a sufficient supply of food at home to eat during spring break.

The Board of Directors and members of Delta House, Inc. remain dedicated to serve the surrounding community, and the Midlands; and is also dedicated to ensure that a venue is available for the facilitation of services for those in need.

Today, Delta House Inc. remains a cornerstone of the Columbia community. Its members continue the work of their predecessors, advocating for social justice, education, and the empowerment of African Americans. The facility serves as a cultural and historical landmark, a place where the achievements of African American women are celebrated, and the values of service, sisterhood, and scholarship are upheld.

Delta House Incorporated and The Delta Development Center are a reminder of the power of collective action and the importance of creating spaces where marginalized voices can organize, learn, and thrive. Through decades of change, it has remained a steadfast symbol of the strength and resilience of the African American community in Columbia and beyond.

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