

# University of Arkansas Sorority Sets House Makeover

## Groundbreaking today on the lawn

By Chris Branam  
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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/MICHAEL WOODS --05/04/2012-- University of Arkansas junior Shelby Mohs and University alum Susan Burckart talk about the planned expansion of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority house Friday morning on the University of Arkansas campus.

FAYETTEVILLE, AR; The Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority house at the University of Arkansas is about to undergo its third significant makeover since it was built in 1935. But the women of the Gamma Nu chapter promise this will be the biggest renovation in the house's 77-year history.

"We're going to take it down to the studs," said Susan Burckart, a Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority member initiated in 1978. "The overall space will increase by about 25 percent," Burckart said, adding that the project won't affect the classic Greek revival facade, with its signature colonnade, second-floor balcony and front porch.

Burckart will join hundreds of alumnae and current chapter members for a groundbreaking ceremony at noon today on the front lawn of the house. The house is on the northwest corner of Maple Street and Leverett Avenue, about 200 yards north of Old Main. The sorority, which has been at UA since 1925, has raised nearly \$3 million in private funding toward the \$7 million needed to renovate and expand the house. The remaining finances needed for the project will be secured through a bank loan similar to a home mortgage, said Melissa Bond, who served with Burckart on the alumnae fundraising committee. The sorority owns the house and the property it sits on. The house's 98 residents will move out after UA graduation next Saturday and the house will then shut down for construction, with a planned completion in August 2013. The project will add 10,000 square feet to the building, bringing it to almost 42,000 square feet.

Kappa Kappa Gamma has set up living arrangements for the displaced members in a new apartment complex in south Fayetteville, said Shelby Mohs, publicity director for the chapter. Two years ago, it became obvious that the house needed major upgrades to its infrastructure, including its faulty central heating and cooling units, said Judy Phillips, an initiate from 1973 who helped spearhead the fundraising effort. An architectural firm found deficiencies in several areas, including: Limited study spaces that had insufficient lighting and unreliable Internet access. Aging and outdated wiring, heating and air conditioning systems and plumbing that were in constant need of repair and replacement. An outdated kitchen that was inadequate to prepare meals for 200-plus members on a regular basis. A chapter meeting room with a capacity of 75 had become inadequate for a chapter that had grown to nearly 300 members. The sorority currently holds its weekly chapter meetings in rented spaces on campus, Mohs said.

When the sorority received a \$2 million estimate on just utility upgrades, its alumnae decided to raise money for a total makeover, with a focus on creating more places for the students to study. "The money we're raising is to pay for the educational spaces within the house," said Bond, a 1980 initiate. That includes the planned Deacon-Ritgerod Library, named in honor of alumnae Marie Deacon Landon and Kathy Ritgerod Nickles. The women were classmates of former chapter President Lynne Walton, the wife of chairman and CEO of Arvest Bank Group Jim Walton, son of Wal-Mart Stores Inc. founder Sam Walton. The Walton Family Foundation donated \$250,000 for the naming rights to the library, Burckart said.

The sorority has nearly hit its goal in a campaign it calls "Our Legacy, Our Future" - without the benefit of mass mailings to the chapter's 2,800 alumnae, Phillips said. Alumnae held fundraising "parties" across the country. They set up phone trees and the current members also called alumnae to solicit gifts. "We've been really blessed and fortunate that the Kappa alums ... they have stepped up to the plate in these tough economic times," Phillips said. "We kind of took a step of faith and here we are."

The house was expanded and renovated in 1965, and there were additional upgrades made in the 1980s, Burckart said. The second floor of the house features traditional characteristics of a sororityhouse - hardwood floors, formal sitting rooms with elegant decor - but looks can be deceiving, Burckart pointed out while giving a tour on Friday. "This looks nice in here," she said. "What you don't see is the wiring. You don't see the plumbing. You can feel that there's no air conditioning."

The 1965 project made it possible to accommodate 75 women, and the living space hasn't grown in the years since. The sorority added bunk beds in some of the rooms to create space for almost 100 members. The renovation focuses on expanding the common areas because there was no way to add enough room to provide lodging for 300 women, Mohs said. But the bedrooms will get a new look, with built-in beds, desks and bookshelves. That way, the residents won't need to move in their own furniture, she said. Mohs is on track to graduate before the new house opens, but she said she looks forward to visiting in the future.

"It will still be the white house on a hill," she said.

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