

DON'T THROW WHAT YOU KNOW UNTIL YOU KNOW WHAT YOU THROW!

BY DR. MARI ANN CALLAIS, ALPHA BETA, PAST NATIONAL PRESIDENT

In this age of social media, web presence, and anything in between, there seems to be so much more emphasis on pictures, videos, and graphics than ever before. Many of us take pictures, videos, etc., and display them to share with others about how we feel, what's important to us, and what we are experiencing. Hand signs and other signs are part of this experience. We have seen hand signs in pop culture for many years. Taylor Swift showed us her love by her infamous "heart" sign, universities have "spirit hand signs" such as University of Texas "Longhorn" hand sign, and even folks from Hawaii using the "Hang Loose" hand sign. Back in the day, the "peace sign" and raising the "number one" at sporting events were popular as well. Why have we seen in recent years an emphasis on hand signs in the fraternity and sorority world? Some might say this "Throw What You Know" emergence is because of the need to "show others what is important to us." Others indicate that it is our need to fit in and be a part of the pop culture.

Some might ask, *what does all of this mean to Theta Phi Alpha?* Within the past couple of years, Theta Phi Alpha collegians have started "throwing" various signs that represent Theta Phi Alpha in some way. Historically, hand signs have not been a part of Theta Phi Alpha, but with the recent attention given to "throw what you know," we decided to ask some of our interfraternal friends, as well as survey our members and get their perspective.

There is very little by way of research as to whether or not hand signs are an official part of any organization. Walter Kimbrough's research is probably the most thorough and states that hand signs began showing

up in the early 1900s as the Black fraternal organizations were evolving. In the 1970s, hand signs began to emerge in Black fraternity and sorority photos. Still, no research and practically no substantial studies have attempted to illuminate these aspects of Black fraternalism (Kimbrough, 2003).

Michelle Guobadia, member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., shares, "I think it is also important to take a page from culturally based groups as it pertains to signs. We just



Photo credit: Pinterest.com

don't let anyone throw them up. I would never ask a famous person or regular person to throw up the sign in a picture with me. This is reserved for membership. Throwing up the sign is an outward expression that they too carry our values. Not all people do and now in a way they will represent you."

As multicultural organizations began to evolve in the 1970s, there seemed to be more visible hand signs being displayed. According to Sam Centellas, Past National President of Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity, Inc., a historically Latino fraternity with multicultural membership, "We really don't have a policy on hand signs. There are just unspoken rules, I guess, such as only initiated members do it." He also shares: "Hand signs in National Pan-Hellenic Council

organizations and other cultural groups are not cultural. Doing hand signs is not a part of the Latino culture; it is a pop culture thing. Our organizations that call it part of their organizations' culture/history – that is just because they were founded after it became a pop culture thing. The Sigma Lambda Beta hand sign is just because we did what NPHC groups were doing because they are who we connected with when we started. If you re-founded Theta Phi Alpha today, it would have a hand sign, and probably an official one, because it is what fraternities and sororities do now."

In asking other NPC sororities the evolution of their hand signs, there is again, not a lot of clarity as to when these signs began appearing. Delta Delta Delta began seeing "deltas" in pictures in the early 1960s according to Archivist Coordinator Beth Applebaum. Zeta Tau Alpha, who is seen "throwing a crown," shares that they began seeing the "crown" sign somewhere around 2007, according to Heather Kirk, Director of Education & Communications for Zeta Tau Alpha. As Spirit Jerseys, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter all began to have a dominant influence, specifically on undergraduates, we began to see creative ways to show their membership in sororities. The question comes to the forefront: *Is this something that will continue or is it just a phase?*

Some of the NPC sororities have policies about official publications and the use of hand signs. If you look through most printed, official documents, you will not see a hand sign displayed in pictures. Some of them have said it is fun and okay to do more organically, but they do not believe it is neither part of their history or any part of symbolism that ties back to their founding.

In a survey conducted by the Grand Council of Theta Phi Alpha, the responses were quite mixed. It seemed as though collegians clearly said this is a part of our campus culture and that the Fraternity needs an official sign. Alumnae seemed to not see it as necessary and almost contradictory to whom we are; they believe that we would be doing it "because everyone else is."

Call to Action

It seems there is a greater question and opportunity that presents itself to us as an organization to consider. Do we know enough about “what we throw” and how can we use this forum as an opportunity to educate?

As an organization and as members of Theta Phi Alpha, this discussion brings to light an opportunity for a Call to Action. As someone who has spent the majority of my professional career researching, teaching, and trying to influence others to get to know our organizations, I see this as an amazing opportunity. Throughout the years, some of our history, teaching of Ritual, and understanding who we are as an organization have gotten lost. If we are going to say we are proud to be members of Theta Phi Alpha, it is imperative we know what that means. It is time for us to really learn about Theta Phi Alpha, our meaning, our values, and what we promise to do as a result of our commitment to Theta Phi Alpha and one another.

Instead of focusing on an official hand sign, we should focus on educating our members on the meaning behind “what we are throwing.” There is a lack of attention in many of our chapters as to how Theta Phi Alpha’s Ritual is, what makes us who we are, and makes us different from other fraternal organizations.

Before you “throw what you know,” ask yourself: *Do I know Theta Phi Alpha?*

It’s time to look at our branding as the whole picture – what we show one another and others who we are and what we represent. It’s time to understand that our letters, symbols, and colors were all chosen for a reason and are tied to our values. It is time to distinguish us from other organizations not by a hand sign, but by living the values of Theta Phi Alpha. It is time for us as Theta Phi Alphas to live our values of truth, justice, and loyalty, and represent ourselves and our Fraternity in the way that we promised.

Representing our letters, in any format, is more important than anything we can throw, wear, or communicate. Our actions as members of Theta Phi Alpha represent those letters, words, symbols, and yes, even hand signs. Before you “throw what you know,” ask yourself: *Do I know Theta Phi*

Alpha? Not only that we care about our sisters, but also that we understand we took a vow to live out the words of our Creed and the values expressed through our Ritual. It really is more than throwing hand signs; it’s a way of life.

If You Are Going To “Throw What You Know,” Use These Guidelines

Theta Phi Alpha does not officially promote or endorse any particular hand sign. However, the use of the “theta” hand sign is highly discouraged and any usage of the symbol should cease immediately. In the Interfraternal world, Kappa Alpha Theta has historically referred to themselves and been known to others as “Theta.” Since they were founded in 1870, they have a historical right to that distinction. We would not want a hand sign to lead our members and others to then refer to us as “Theta” and misrepresent ourselves.

When used consistently over time, signs and symbols, become property of an organization, and are most likely trademarks

of an organization. Theta Phi Alpha does all that can be done to protect our trademarks, and we respect those of all other NPC organizations. Organizations are consistently making an effort to protect their brand, and Theta Phi Alpha is no different.

Furthermore, consider the appropriateness of where, when, and how you are throwing a hand sign or any other sign to represent Theta Phi Alpha. It is stated or understood in some chapters that wearing letters where alcohol is present is not allowed or discouraged and yet, members throw a sign with something that represents Theta Phi Alpha in those same environments. This is more about appropriate displaying of our letters than anything else. It comes down to respect and understanding more than a picture.



Photo credit:
Pinterest.com

Dr. Mari Ann Callais is a speaker for CAMPUSPEAK and Sr. Director of Special Initiatives for Delta Delta Delta. She is part of the New Orleans Area Alumnae Association and lives in Hammond, La. She is also a wearer of the Guard of Honor.

Special thanks for input from the following interfraternal friends:

- Dan Shaver – President/CEO Affinity Marketing Consultants, Inc.
- Wendi Kinney – Executive Director, NGLA; Assistant Dean of Students for Fraternal Life/ Off Campus Services, State University of Geneseo
- Michelle Guobadia – Director of Fraternity & Sorority Life, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- Sam Centellas – Past National President, Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity
- Amy Vojta – Assistant Dean, Fraternity & Sorority Affairs, Rutgers University; Past President, Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors
- Heather Kirk – Director of Education & Communications, Zeta Tau Alpha
- Beth Applebaum – Archivist Coordinator, Delta Delta Delta

Thank you to Wendi Kinney, Amy Vojta, and Thea Zunick for their presentation at the AFA Annual Meeting 2013 entitled *What's With the Hand Signs NPC and NIC?*, which was used as a foundation for this article.

References

Kimbrough, W. M. (2003). *Black Greek 101: The culture, customs, and challenges of Black fraternities and sororities*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.