

Cigar club smokes up a storm

Wand and Nowak light up and tune out

By April Partridge
Features Editor

With baseball caps and huge stogies, Blaiss Nowak and Josh Wand are unlikely teachers. Yet their meetings are attended by professors, students and others seeking cigar panache.

When Nowak and Wand came from Atlanta to Las Vegas to learn about the hospitality industry, they found UNLV's College of Hotel Administration was dedicated to teaching about the finer things in life. There was even a wine club.

But cigars, a hobby both men had enjoyed together for years, were not represented.

Their afternoon smokes outside the dorms began to generate interest, with students stopping to ask for cigars and information. As their following grew, so did their conviction that cigar know-how was a must for hospitality students.

"We saw a need in educating the students," Wand recalled.

Wand attributed the recent upsurge in cigar interest to the magazine *Cigar Aficionado*, which debuted in 1992. The publication is about the "finer things in life," Wand said, focusing on cigars but

including travel, wine and other interests. The primarily upper-middle-class male readership embraced the image and the cigar fad was born.

Cigars may be a fad, "but it's a fad that will hook many genuine cigar smokers,"

Nowak predicted. "We've seen the impact of cigars on the hospitality industry. We felt there was a need to educate the students."

"Not to mention, it's a bonding experience," Nowak continued. "It's total relaxation."

In their quest to educate the public on the finer points of cigars, they lecture on cigar etiquette, purchasing, the state of the industry and manufacture.

"We only taste premium cigars," Wand said.

Nowak agreed. "Life's too short. You might as well smoke the best."

While they can teach others to recognize high quality, UNLV's Cigar Club founders stress the importance of personal preference. "The bottom line is how it tastes," said Wand. "We want them to create their own taste as individuals."

The club is not just an excuse to light up en masse. Wand and Nowak take their educating responsibilities seriously. The first part of each meeting is dedicated

to learning about the cigar Du jour.

The actual smoking comes after the educational portion. This is when the members get a chance to

relax, drink and socialize.

Guest speakers are also brought in occasionally. Next week's speaker is Raul Martinez, a host of the Los Angeles radio talk show *Cigar Renaissance*. Greg Baer, owner of the new cigar store *Pheasant* will speak about industry trends sometime this semester.

Real Cuban cigar rollers from Las Vegas Cigar Company will demonstrate cigar-making techniques. Wand and Nowak spend much of their lecturing time on the physical characteristics of the cigars. Size, shape and the way its rolled will affect how long it burns and what the experience will entail. The kind of tobacco used and the experience of the rollers will also make a difference.

Cigars range in size from the mammoth Double Corona to the petite Corona. The Robusto is short but fat, while the Churchill is long and thin. There are more exotic shapes, such as the torpedo, which is named for its unusual shape, and the pyramid, which starts thin and

widens toward the bottom.

Equipment also makes a difference. Cigars cannot be stored at room temperature for long, so a humidor is a must. A good oak or cherrywood humidor for the beginner, holding about 20 cigars, sells for about \$100.

The special case has grooves to hold water, keeping the cigars at a constant 70 degrees and 70 percent humidity. If kept airtight, a cigar will last indefinitely under those conditions. As an experienced connoisseur, however, Wand keeps 75 to 100 cigars in his personal stash. As tastes develop, a smoker may add to his collection.

Getting the cigars is not as simple as one would think. The sudden upsurge of demand in the past few years has created more demand for the highest quality products than the market can supply. Wand stresses the importance of good contacts in tracking down

the number needed for the club. "We find people," he said. "It's not about money. You have to know how and who you have to get to."

Many of the Cigar Club's weekly samplings come from friends of Wand and Nowak in Los Angeles, New York and Atlanta. Most cost \$5 to \$9. The club dues of \$35 per semester cover most of the cost of buying and shipping the cigars for the seven to eight meetings.

Some of the better cigars are off limits to the club for political reasons. Wand's favorite, the Romeo y Julieta Churchill, can only be enjoyed during his occasional European trips because of its Cuban origin.

According to Wand, Cubans are the indisputable cigars of choice, illegal in the United States since 1968, when the United States imposed a trade embargo on the island country. Some growers and rollers left to practice their craft in other parts of Latin America, but Cuba still produces the best, Wand said.

"Life's too short. You might as well smoke the best."

—Blaiss Nowak,
Cigar Club co-founder

Stepping back, stepping forward

Black fraternities and sororities show their pride

By Heather Subran
Staff Features Writer

The step shows performed by African American fraternities and sororities at UNLV have different meanings for those who view them and those who perform them.

On Wednesday Omega Psi Phi fraternity performed in front of the Moyer Student Union for more than 60 people. While reactions to their performance were mixed, and few UNLV students are aware of its significance.

Amber Jo Moses, 21, a junior communications major who watched the fraternity perform said, "I thought it was culturally rewarding and mildly entertaining."

Other student reactions included questions like, "Is it a heritage thing?"

Brook Wilderman, 18, dance major, said, "I don't know if they even had a purpose or maybe it's an initiation thing or something."

Step shows performed by African American fraternities and sororities envelop historical tradition, culture and style. The idea of rhythm and communication through the movement of the body has been carried on from African traditions unto the college campuses of North America.

Monique Madara, a senior marketing major and a member of Alpha

Kappa Alpha sorority, said, "I know that it's a result of several different things like the traditional boot dance directly from Africa."

Madara adds that much of the performance has a military background. Stepping represents the strength, discipline, and pride that members of the fraternities and sororities believe is indigenous to African people.

In a National Public Radio broadcast, cultural anthropologist Larry Smallwood said modern stepping began with returning World War II soldiers. They brought their military cadences from the battlefield and integrated them with traditional West African dance patterns.

Stepping became part of the initiation process, with pledges learning the drills specific to their fraternity, according to cultural anthropologist Maurice Henderson in the same broadcast. The precise coordination of complex movements illustrate their unity of purpose, he added.

Today, stepping is performed both with and without music, to the dismay of traditionalists, who prefer only vocal and other noises generated by the performers.



Heavy military or work boots are usually used for stepping, creating the signature stomping sounds.

Thigh-slapping, clapping and snapping also contribute.

Eugene McLaugh, director of the Minority Engineering Program, said, "It's a matter of presenting the members of the fraternities. They do more stepping now than when I first joined Kappa Alpha Psi."

Multicultural Student Affairs Director Velicia Haron says that many of these African American organizations evolved along the lines of segregation that is indicative of North American history.

"They were created at colleges to provide a sense of community and to promote scholarly endeavors and service," Haron said. Step shows are a way to

present these standards to the public, she added.

Access to any organization cannot be denied because of ethnicity, Haron continued. These fraternities and sororities are not exclu-

sively for African Americans, she said.

Step shows portray history through oral tradition. The combination of dance and speech presents a powerful image to the public and helps black fraternities and sororities get their message across.

Madara said of Wednesday's performance, "I loved the beginning technique but some of their chants could have been left out." Haron said one of the more memorable things about Omega Psi Phi is the fraternity's flare for shock value.

Crystal Cox, 22, a criminal justice graduate student in Zeta Phi Theta said, "I thought it was a really good performance. The lyrics were typical for (Omega Psi Phi) and their image is of dogs." Cox added that one of the main purposes of step shows is to give black students a chance to talk about their collective history and also to entertain. "For our ancestors music was everything, music was all around. Here the drum beats are made with our bodies," she said.

Another purpose of the step shows is to pay tribute to one's ancestors. It is a unique, creative form of expression and a show of dignity.

"I think they try to show a piece of their culture that other sororities and fraternities don't have," said Moses.

"They have a unique style and I think they're awesome."

"Stepping is a form of identification," Haron said. "It's used to recruit. It's a form of self-advocacy."

"For Omegas, the verbiage that has evolved in American culture cannot really be associated with traditional African culture," Haron continued.

Once or twice every year at UNLV do all eight of the African American fraternities and sororities come together to perform and teach through step.

"Steps are usually collaborative efforts," Madara said. "We get help from other chapters."

Each performance should be a description of what that fraternity or sorority stands for.

While stepping is important to black Greeks, members caution that it isn't their mission. Cox said, "Public service is our main goal; everything else is secondary."

The vitality expressed in the step shows performed by fraternities like Alpha Phi Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi represent the energy and determination of the people who comprise these fraternities.

According to a *Washington Post* article by Jill Nelson, hundreds of step competitions take place in the United States every year. Many are coordinated by black sororities and fraternities which have UNLV chapters. A 1992 competition raised \$72,000 for charity in five hours.

The style and grace that sororities like Delta Sigma Theta, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Sigma Gamma Rho, strive to maintain is coupled with a dedication to preserving the well-being of their community. As they step their ideals should show.