

ΑΦΩ

The Gold Sash

ITS LEGEND

ITS ORIGIN

*A tradition of the Epsilon chapter of
Alpha Phi Omega*

*Respectfully submitted
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The Legend of the Gold Sash

In 1980, the Epsilon chapter of Alpha Phi Omega was barely a chapter. Pledge classes regularly had fewer than five initiates. Enthusiasm for the future was difficult to build among brothers. Eddie Mackie, an alumnus of the Sigma Alpha chapter (UM-St. Louis), served as the Section 49 Chair during that time, and he remembered Epsilon as “being the fifth chapter founded, and having about five brothers total.”

Epsilon alumnus Randy Cupp was an active brother during this time. Mackie said Cupp contacted him in 1981, asking him to come speak to Epsilon. “They said, ‘We’ve got real problems up here, and we need you to come talk to us,’” Mackie said. “So I made the trip.”

Mackie said the brothers had “a list of woes,” and were trying to upgrade Epsilon’s program of service. The chapter had just begun the Family Flower and pledge nickname traditions in 1979, yet the brothers feared that Epsilon would cease to be a chapter.

“I said, ‘This chapter will not die on my watch,’” Mackie said. “I told them to think about all the years, all the men and women who have committed themselves to the idea of service. This will work, even if I have to come up here every weekend.”

Mackie said they discussed recruiting ideas and how to keep Epsilon alive. “They made a

promise to each other, and to me, to do what they could to keep Epsilon going,” Mackie said.

Epsilon slowly and steadily flourished from that point. The *Blue & Gold*, Epsilon’s weekly newsletter, first was published for brothers on Oct. 6, 1981. Epsilon also helped host the 1982 National Convention in Kansas City, Mo. Within three years of Mackie’s visit, Epsilon began initiating pledge classes of more than 20 people.

Epsilon was on its way.

An Alpha Rho Tradition

Is Bestowed Upon Epsilon

Eddie Mackie returned to visit Epsilon in 1985. He was still the Section 49 Chair, and he was in Kirksville for Epsilon’s annual spring formal. “The Golden Eagle Banquet Spring Formal” took place April 13, 1985, at the Bonfoey Inn. Formal had become an event the chapter looked forward to each year, and this year was no different. The keynote speaker was Randy Cupp, now an alumnus. The chapter had about 50 brothers at the time. Jim Mossop, Joy Jenkins, chapter advisors and the formal committee presented awards that evening.

Mackie also had awards to present: the first Gold Sashes.

“I’ll admit it: I stole the idea,” Mackie said.

Before transferring as a student to UM-St. Louis, Mackie was an active brother at the Alpha Rho chapter (University of Texas-Austin). He

pledged in fall 1974, and past AΦΩ National President Wilfred Krenek was his pledgemaster.

As part of its traditions, Alpha Rho had 13 ‘spirit groups,’ which were smaller subsets of the chapter for active brothers that had distinguished themselves in various ways. The most prestigious spirit group at Alpha Rho was the Silver Spiriters. Alpha Rho legend states the spirit group, and the Silver Spiriter award, began on the chapter’s 25th (silver) anniversary in about 1960.

“The legend was that the Alpha Rho chapter was waning, and the chapter’s focus was a concern, so a group of actives and alumni (that later became the Silver Spiriters) rose up and rejuvenated the chapter,” said Mackie, also a recipient of the award.

If at any time in the future the chapter was in trouble, they should let it be known, and the Silver Spiriters would reappear and do whatever needed to be done for the chapter. This legend, and the Silver Spiriters, is the origin of the Gold Sashes.”

Mackie said the award was a silver lame’ sash, worn similar to a Boy Scout Merit Badge, over one shoulder. He said the Silver Spiriters would vote amongst themselves, by a unanimous vote, on who would become the future Silver Spiriters. “The spirit groups were built on tradition and history,” Mackie said. “It was just a form of recognition. It wasn’t a clique.”

Mackie said Silver Spiriters were not chosen on popularity, or for merely performing the duties of whatever offices they held. They went above and beyond the three Cardinal principles of leadership, friendship and service.

It was with this idea that Mackie, as the Section 49 Chair, presented the first Gold Sashes to Epsilon; gold, since the chapter had reached its “golden” age of 50 years in 1977. He selected the first Gold Sash recipients based upon input he gathered from Epsilon brothers. He said what those brothers did in continuing to rebuild Epsilon reminded him of the legend of the Silver Spiriters.

“A chapter who believes they have special people among them will believe they themselves are special,” Mackie said. “I thought it was important that some of them be recognized.”

The first Gold Sash recipients Mackie selected were Chuck Caverly, Randy Cupp, Joy Jenkins, Jodi Miezio, Jim Mossop, Mark Rash, Steve Rodgers and Ruth Rogers.

“While I was one of the first to receive a Gold Sash, I was even more honored because I was an alumni at the time,” Cupp said. “I had attempted to be an active alumni with the chapter for several years, but I certainly did not expect to receive any recognition for this involvement.”

Mossop, who pledged in spring 1983, was honored to be an original Gold Sash recipient.

“A brother did not have to hold office or be the most outspoken to be a Gold Sash recipient; it looked at the inner focus of the brother, and what that person brought to the organization,” he said. “It was an honor to know that Eddie felt that I exemplified the character of a good Alpha Phi Omega brother.”

The Gold Sash Tradition Goes Its Own Way

Despite the newness of the tradition, Mossop said the original sashes chose to continue the tradition in the manner consistent with the Silver Spiriter award. Mossop said it is a group “found by their actions to be exemplary. It looked at the quality of service, leadership, and friendship – not the quantity.”

Although everyone in Alpha Phi Omega was dedicated to the three Cardinal principles, the Gold Sash recipients were those that went the extra mile for the chapter and for others, helping to make the chapter a better organization,” Mossop said.

Donna Thorne pledged Epsilon in fall 1988, and she said by that time the award’s uniqueness was what made it established and worthwhile.

“This is the one award that refrains from being a total popularity contest,” said Thorne, a 1992 Gold Sash recipient. “It’s a diverse group that represents all the positive interests of the chapter.”

Brad Niebling pledged Epsilon in fall 1995 and received a Gold Sash in 1997. He said sashes gather significant amounts of information and do not take lightly the task of choosing new sashes.

“With few exceptions, the group of Gold Sashes are brothers that are high achieving, yet humble brothers that are incredibly thoughtful,” Niebling said. “They take the job of choosing sashes very seriously, sometimes spending days poring over their options. Although there will always be a debate about who deserved a Gold Sash and didn’t

get one, there has rarely been debate that someone receiving a Gold Sash that did not deserve one.”

Michael ‘Biscuit’ Bisacca received the Gold Sash in 1992, and he described the award as one of the most humbling Epsilon awards he’s received.

“It wasn’t about popularity or who you knew, the Gold Sash was about your ability to be a total brother in leadership, friendship and service. It represented recognition of service to the fraternity above offices, politics or popularity.”

The tradition, born at Alpha Rho and continued at Epsilon, continues to slowly spread elsewhere in the fraternity. The Beta Rho chapter (University of Arkansas) adopted the Gold Sash tradition in 1999, based on Epsilon’s award. Beta Rho keeps with the spirit of the award; only current sashes may choose the new recipients.

Another important part of the tradition is the making of the Gold Sashes themselves. Epsilon advisor Linda ‘Mom’ Caraway said she has loaned her sewing machine on many occasions to assist with the process. “I have volunteered several different times to help make them, but the previous Gold Sashes have always made them themselves,” said Caraway, a 2000 Gold Sash recipient.

“Gold lame’ does not sew well,” said Anne Chopin, a 1999 Gold Sash recipient. “It’s minimally a five-hour process involving ironing, sewing, Velcro, and guessing how long those things really are supposed to be. One of them will be only two feet long, and someone will always run out to get pizza and be gone for five hours.”

Niebling said humility often is a trait of a Gold Sash recipient. “They do not feel that they deserve to be rewarded for their actions,” he said.

When the Gold Sash tradition arrived at Epsilon, the chapter was on the other end of an effort to restore a heritage nearly lost. The work of those brothers paved the way for the renewal of Alpha Phi Omega-Epsilon on the campus of Northeast Missouri State University in Kirksville, Mo. The original Gold Sashes did not expect a reward for their actions; but Mackie, almost as an afterthought, gave out a new award that became a tradition, and the tradition became legend.

“It is a testament to all of the brothers of Epsilon to have the Gold Sash award continue to be

an important part of tradition,” Cupp said. “The award is not just a recognition of past deeds, but a commitment by each Gold Sash award recipient to bring [leadership, friendship and service] into the future for the benefit of everyone.”

Mackie said the tradition is noteworthy and exceptional.

“There’s no set formula for determining who’s worthy of a Gold Sash,” he said. “It’s for a sustained level of commitment to the ideals of the fraternity, and brothers can do that in different ways. But if it’s still going almost 20 years later, then you all are doing it right. You’re doing it the right way.”

-Jim Roach

Epilogue

“Where did the Gold Sash tradition originate?”

That superb question was asked by a pledge in February 2001. At that point, no story was ever told for where this unique tradition first appeared in Epsilon’s history. No one knew.

The Gold Sash history ties together diverse people from Epsilon’s past: an Epsilon alumnus who was one of two pledges in fall 1978; a former Section 49 Chair that served from 1981-1988, and an Epsilon advisor who deserves any award or accolade bestowed upon her.

Special thanks to Epsilon alumni Randy Cupp, Donna Thorne, Brad Niebling, Anne Chopin, Jim Mossop and Michael ‘Biscuit’ Bisacca for sharing personal reflections regarding the Gold Sash tradition.

Also continued thanks to former Section 49 Chair and former Region VIII Director Eddie Mackie, for bringing the Gold Sashes to Epsilon, and contributing to the chapter’s rich heritage.

We have great and continued appreciation to Epsilon advisor Linda ‘Mom’ Caraway, for her commitment to Epsilon’s best interests, and for her stewardship of fraternity tradition.

It is the hope of Gold Sash recipients that this account provides Epsilon with a truthful portrayal of the Gold Sash tradition’s inception, and why the award continues to this day. It is worth remembering.