You’d think it was 1954 at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where stepping inside the secret chapter rooms of sorority rush reveals a pre-Civil Rights Movement mind-set. But last fall, a group of women—black and white—stood up to the backward traditions that have kept the nation’s largest Greek system segregated well into the 21st century.
Upon learning which sorority offered them a bid to join, pledges run from the University of Alabama’s Bryant-Denny Stadium on August 17, 2013, to their new homes. As in years past, none of the pledges were African-American.
CHRYSTAL STALLWORTH, OF Lawton, Oklahoma, packed her bags and set off for sorority rush at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. She was the total package: 4.3 grade point average, premed, student body president of her high school, a cheerleader, and a volunteer for an organization that raises money to fight cancer. “I tried to make myself the all-around college candidate,” she says. During the first round, Stallworth, now 20, visited the 16 Panhellenic sororities that participate in formal rush and loved every minute of touring the multimillion-dollar mansions and meeting the women who could be her sisters. “I was giving it my all,” she says. “Trying to meet these people and be like, ‘This is who I am.’”

But after the first round, she was invited back to only four houses. Other similarly qualified girls were asked back to nearly every house—more than the 12 maximum they were allowed to visit in the second round. In other words, sororities were fighting over them, while rejecting Stallworth. After the second round, she was invited back to only one house and decided to withdraw from rush. “I was really upset,” Stallworth recalls. “It was probably one of the worst weeks I’ve ever spent at Alabama. It made me feel like, ‘What am I doing here? Nobody wants me?’ I felt like I didn’t belong, which is hard, especially as an incoming freshman.”

Weeks later, after classes had begun, Stallworth figured out what set her apart from other candidates: She’s half black. “When I got on campus, I started noticing when I would see all the girls in sororities, there were no minorities, or if there were, maybe a few Asian women,” Stallworth says. “I probably wouldn’t have even noticed if I didn’t have a best friend who is in a sorority at the University of Oklahoma. Her sorority is so diverse. … That was the point I realized, Whoa, people still do see race here.”

THE LAST STAND

With more than 8,600 members, the Greek system at the University of Alabama is the nation’s largest. At some universities, the Greek system may be an insignificant part of life on campus, but at Alabama—where one out of every four students belongs to a Greek-letter organization—Greeks rule the school. The bonds students foster at these organizations continue long after graduation, influencing job placements and even government elections. At the time Stallworth went through rush—and since the first sorority opened at the university in 1904—only one woman who was identifiably black had ever been offered a bid, or invitation to join, during formal recruitment. Her name was Carla Ferguson, and she pledged Gamma Phi Beta in 2003. (Another woman, Christina Houston, rushed Gamma Phi Beta in 2000, but it wasn’t known that she was half black until after she was accepted.) When Ferguson was admitted, Alabama’s then Panhellenic Association president Heather Schacht told The Tuscaloosa News, “We’ve made a big step today, and hopefully it is something that we can build on.” But in the years that followed, none of the 16 traditionally white sororities extended a bid to a black woman. “During orientation, someone advised us against rushing,” says Halle Lindsay, 20, a junior from Dayton, Ohio, who attends Alabama with her twin sister. “Someone told my mom sororities don’t really take black girls. Everyone from around here knows that, but being from out of state, you wouldn’t really know. … It was really confusing, like, just because I’m black I can’t be a part of this?”

Theoretically, Alabama’s sororities could claim that, other than Stallworth, none of the black women who rushed over the years were qualified. Every chapter has a minimum grade point average, and as rush can be a superficial
process with pretty, popular girls getting picked first, all of the black rushees could have been deemed too unattractive or lacking the right personality. But in exclusive interviews with Marie Claire, sorority members at Alabama revealed conversations and directives that paint a much different picture, providing the first in-depth, behind-the-scenes look at a story that initially caught national attention last fall. “We were told we do not take black girls, because it would be bad for our chapter—our reputation and our status,” says junior Yardena Wolf, 20, a member of Alpha Omicron Pi. “There was a list of girls who were to be dropped from rush,” says senior Caroline Bechtel, 21, a member of Phi Mu. “Anyone who was a minority was automatically added to it. Sometimes they’d say things like, ‘Oh, she wore an ugly dress,’ but it was so obviously wrong, so obviously racism.”

At Kappa Delta, the oldest and arguably most prestigious house on campus, the rushees are seated in different rooms depending on how interested the sorority is in pledging them. The best room, called Rush-to-Pledge, is reserved for rushees whom the sorority wants to give the hard sell. Kappa Delta member Kirkland Back, 22, a 2014 graduate, says that in her years in the sorority she saw only two black women ever seated there—and one was a mistake. “This past year, a black girl ended up in the Rush-to-Pledge room,” Back says. “Someone messed up and seated her in the wrong spot ... so you can imagine the sad hilarity of watching a bunch of really privileged white girls freaking out. They were like, ‘Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God! What are we going to do? She can’t think we actually like her!’ So they were like, ‘Nobody talk to her. ... She’s gotta know that she’s not welcome. She’s gotta know this isn’t going to work out.’” “It’s not that we’ve never had black girls come through rush,” says Melanie Gotz, 22, a 2014 Alabama graduate and member of Alpha Gamma Delta. “I would see them in the first round, and then they all disappeared. I just figured they didn’t make the grades. Until this year, I didn’t realize that they were being automatically dropped after the first round. I feel really naive now—I didn’t really think racism existed in such a blatant way anymore.” (When asked to respond to the allegations, national officials for each of the sororities cited their policies opposing discrimination based on race, religion, or ethnic background.)

Years later, the sting of rejection black women experience remains. Melody Twilley Zeidan, now 30, was cut from every sorority at Alabama during rush in 2000 and 2001, even though she graduated from one of the state’s best schools and was part of the university’s honors program. “It’s been 14 years, and I would like to say I look back and say, ‘Sororities? Oh, that’s silly’ but it still hurts to think people didn’t want to get to know me because of my skin tone,” she says.

In September 2013, the long-held, unofficial practice of barring black women from traditionally white sororities finally began to change, thanks to a group of sorority women who spoke out in favor of integration. Their actions proved unpopular with many of their sorority sisters, but in daring to reveal the secret practices that have allowed the Greek system at Alabama to remain segregated for more than a century, Wolf, Bechtel, Back, Gotz, and others sparked a march on campus of more than 100 students who carried a banner that read, “The Final Stand in the Schoolhouse Door”—a nod to former Alabama Governor George Wallace’s 1963 “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door.” That “final stand” helped usher in informal rush, during which the university boasted that 21 black women joined white sororities. “I remember saying, ‘This is wrong. Why are we sticking to all of these traditions?’” Bechtel says. “We’re an awesome group of women, so I just thought, Why don’t we try doing something different? Why are we adhering to the legacy of what the Greek system is?”
Rush and have a say in who makes the cut. Two hours before and in Gotz’s house, a handful of alumnae assist with Gamma Delta member Gotz and her sisters were set to vote days of 20-minute “ice water teas” at each house), Alpha Omicron Pi, except, instead of students offering members “protection against would-be social climbers,” Hughey says, adding that some retained “whites-only” clauses in their constitutions until the 1960s and ’70s.

There is no official tally of the number of minorities in historically white Greek organizations. The umbrella groups that operate most chapters—the nation’s 5,975 fraternities are governed by the North-American Interfraternity Conference and 3,127 sororities by the National Panhellenic Conference (both are based in Indianapolis)—have little incentive to record numbers that would make them look bad, and universities typically take a hands-off approach to Greek organizations, claiming they have little control over what goes on inside the houses. But they do have an incentive to promote diversity. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance are prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, and national origin. Though Alabama’s Greek organizations don’t directly receive public funds, because their houses sit on university-owned land, one could make a case that the university is not fulfilling its Title VI obligations. But despite knowing there were no black members in the traditionally white houses and knowing African-Americans make up 12 percent of the Alabama student body, the administration did not spur the Greek system to integrate—students did.

Last August, an incoming freshman named Kennedi Cobb, who carried a 4.3 grade point average in high school and was class salutatorian, decided to rush. What made Cobb (who declined to be interviewed for this story) especially well-qualified was that she is from Tuscaloosa (local women are often favored during rush), and her step-grandfather, John England Jr., is on the university’s board of trustees. (For what it’s worth, Cobb also happens to be the most beautiful, Martin Luther King Jr.-esque speeches” in favor of admitting Cobb. “Girls would stand up and be like, ‘There are no black girls in sororities, but we are ready to be that house,’” Gotz says. The alumnae told the students Cobb was not asked back because of a technicality with her letter of recommendation. “It was so obvious we were being lied to,” Gotz says. “But there was only so much we could do. ... I asked if we could keep her another day to get things figured out. They said, ‘Absolutely not.’ We dropped her that day. The room was defeated. Everyone was crying.”

Days later, a similar scene played out in Yardena Wolf’s house, Alpha Omicron Pi, except, instead of students challenging alumnae, the students themselves were divided. During the third round of rush (two “skit days,” in which rushees get to know the...
personality of each house), the members met to decide whether to offer a bid to any of the black rushees. Many women spoke in opposition. According to Wolf, some worried aloud that fraternities would no longer “swap” with them. (Swap is the term for when a fraternity invites a sorority to a private party.) Others said their parents would make them drop out of the house if a black girl joined. Eventually, the students voted against it. “Until then, I had no idea racism wasn’t a thing of the past, and if I did, I would have thought it was people who were older,” Wolf says. “Never in a million years would I have guessed it was people of my own age.”

One by one, each house on sorority row cut Cobb and the other black rushers. But rather than allow the status quo to persist for yet another year, some sorority women spoke out. “Our sorority has a culture of silence. We were to never speak about the fact that we didn’t have any African-Americans,” says Katie Smith, 20, a senior and member of Wolf’s house, Alpha Omicron Pi. “I was tired of being silenced.” Members of several houses were quoted anonymously in an article published by the campus newspaper, The Crimson White. CNN, The New York Times, and other outlets sent reporters to cover the story. If some of the women who spoke out had initial support in their houses, media reports—seen by their sisters as bringing shame to the sororities—put an end to that. “I was the villain in my house,” says Gotz, the only student quoted by name in the Crimson White story. “It was so hard to live there. I got so many looks and didn’t feel comfortable at all. I had to go home at some point to go to bed, but I avoided it as much as I could. I didn’t even want to go to the bathroom, because I didn’t want to see people.” Wolf felt so bullied that she moved out after about 10 days after rush ended, into an apartment near campus. “It was really hostile,” she says. “No one wanted to talk to me. There were whispers that would stop when I walked up.” After she moved out, she still attended the occasional frat party, but icy run-ins with her sisters eventually made her avoid Greek life altogether. “I’d hear snarky comments at parties, like, ‘There’s the girl who betrayed our sisterhood,’” Wolf says. Bechtel experienced a similarly harsh atmosphere. “I still get anxiety about walking into my sorority,” she says. “Sometimes I sit in my car because I’m afraid to go in.”

Ultimately, the university’s administration stepped in. President Judy Bonner issued a video statement on the school’s antidiscrimination stance (to drive home her point, she included photos of a recent visit she’d had with Bill Cosby). “While we will not tell any group who they must pledge, the University of Alabama will not tolerate discrimination of any kind,” she said in the statement. “The chapter members are ready to move forward. The University of Alabama will support them in every way possible. We will work extremely hard to remove any barriers that they perceive. If we are going to adequately prepare our students to compete in the global society, we simply must make systemic and profound changes.” Bonner (who was “not available” for an interview) mandated an informal round of rush, known as continuous open bidding, during which the houses were allowed to add members in the hope that the extra spots would go to minorities. In lieu of formal recruitment, members of the sororities reached out to people they knew to see if they’d like to join. “A lot of my friends approached me during open bidding and said, ‘You’d be so great—we’d love to have you,’ but they never looked my way before,” says Khortlan Patterson, 20, an African-American student who eventually joined Alpha Kappa Alpha, one of three traditionally black sororities on campus. (Black sororities were formed in the early 1900s, when black students were prohibited from joining white houses. They’re governed separately from the traditionally white houses by the National Pan-Hellenic Council Inc., based in Decatur, Georgia.)

A few days later, Bonner announced that the traditionally white sororities had extended 72 new bids, 11 of which went to African-Americans. Cobb accepted a bid to join Alpha Chi Omega. Wolf and Smith’s house admitted two black women, and Gotz’s sorority pledged one: Halle Lindsay, the junior who had been dissuaded from rushing during her freshman orientation. “They were so welcoming,” Lindsay says. “I went to check out the house and left feeling like I’d fit in there no matter what race I am.” Open bidding went on for the remainder of the year. By spring, university spokeswoman Cathy Andreen says there were 21 African-American sorority members. “The University of Alabama now has one of the most diverse Greek systems in the nation,” Andreen says. When asked how she arrived at that conclusion, since no national count exists, Andreen said she based her claim on “our Greek Affairs staff’s longstanding experience and interactions with peers at other institutions, as well as feedback from the national headquarters organizations.”

Nevertheless, black women make up only about 0.4 percent of Alabama’s some 5,000 Panhellenic sorority members. “In 2013, we’re jumping over ourselves because one black woman was accepted into a white sorority?” says the University of Connecticut’s Hughey. “If that’s our benchmark of progress, that’s pathetic.” Bechtel, whose house admitted one African-American, says not much has changed. “It’s not like the floodgates opened and there are suddenly people of every color. It’s still all mostly privileged white girls.” Even less has changed at Back’s house, Kappa Delta, one of two or three sororities that have yet to admit an African-American. Back says there was an impression among her sisters that it was unfair to offer a bid to a black woman who didn’t have to jump through the same hoops everyone else did to be in the best house on campus. “They thought, I got selected to be in Kappa Delta because I was worthy, and now we’re giving these girls free bids because they’re tokens?” she says. “And they’re like, That cheapens all of our membership and undermines the exclusivity of this organization.”

Such firmly ingrained mind-sets won’t change overnight, but many are seeing the opening up of the Greek system as impetus to have a larger dialogue on campus. Smith sponsored a resolution in the student government to encourage complete integration in all Greek houses. (It failed, but a similar resolution to support integration passed a month later.) Bechtel and Wolf helped start Students for Open Doors and Ethical Leadership, which brings members of campus groups together to discuss ways to further integrate. Another organization called Blend hosts weekly “Blend Days,” during which students of all races eat together at a designated table in the cafeteria. (Otherwise, the tables are mostly unofficially segregated by race.) The faculty senate created a task force to draw up recommendations for increasing equality on campus. The true test of whether these initiatives are paying off, and whether the integration that came under pressure last fall will have a lasting effect, is the next round of formal sorority recruitment at Alabama. At the moment, rush is on.