

# Where We Are

A VISUAL SERIES ABOUT COMING OF AGE AND FINDING COMMUNITY



## The Cotillion

By CHARLIE BRINKHURST-CUFF | Photographs by MIRANDA BARNES

In a heady swirl of bright white silk and lace, the young ladies of the Cotillion Society of Detroit Educational Foundation are presented as debutantes. The society's annual ball is the culmination of eight months of etiquette lessons, leadership workshops, community service projects and cultural events. As the girls take to the dance floor, they become part of a legacy of Black debutantes in the city and beyond.

Debutante balls, which traditionally helped girls from high society find suitable husbands, emerged from Europe in the 18th century. Black Americans have organized a unique version of them since at least 1895. Responding to the politics of the Jim Crow era, these balls, which emphasized women's education, echoed the work of the racial uplift movement and women's clubs, said Taylor Bythewood-Porter, the curator of a recent exhibition on Black cotillions at the California African American Museum. Organizers saw the balls as a way to "dismiss the idea of Black people not being smart enough, or good enough or worthy enough."

For today's debutantes, many of whom grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods of Detroit, gaining an informal network of Black adult mentors was "life-changing," said Sage Johnson, 17. "Signing up for debutantes, I thought it was just one big ball. But there were a lot more layers to it."

On the day of the ball, as months of study and rehearsals come to fruition, emotions run high. "If I had to sum it up into one word, it's just chaos," said Lexi Clark, a 2022 debutante. "But it's so fun." Her mother, Dr. Renita Clark, founded the Detroit cotillion in 2009.

The girls get ready in two back rooms, which become a bustle of music and wardrobe adjustments. At the entrance to the ballroom, they line up with their father figures — older men in their lives whom they've chosen to accompany them to the stage.

The girls' names and achievements are announced as they enter the ballroom and then they begin a series of seven choreographed dances, some of them with their escorts. The young men have been through a similar program that includes sessions on etiquette, chivalry and financial literacy.

"We were giving each other pep talks," said Madison Galloway, 17, a debutante this year. "I was tearing up because we created connections and everybody looked so beautiful."

The night goes by in a swirl of satin and pearls, under the crystal chandeliers of a Masonic temple. "It felt like a scene out of 'Bridgerton,'" said Skye Davis, 17, another member of this year's cohort.

The debutantes can choose their own escorts, but Dr. Clark also has an informal system to pair up appropriate partners. (She suggests that the girls not choose their boyfriends, in case they break up before the ball.)

At the end of the night, the ball transitions to an after-party, where the music switches from classical to contemporary hip-hop.

The event "was just so magical, not even because we got to wear the white dress," said Mallory Childs, 17. "We genuinely were being celebrated as Black women and Black men."

Nearly 30 girls between the ages of 16 and 18 completed this year's program. They met twice a month starting in September and then up to four times a month from January until the ball in April. "We were taught social graces, but also how to be ourselves, be confident, be the most intelligent in the room, how to carry yourself in any situation," Lexi Clark said. "That's one thing that I really loved about the club — that it wasn't instilling old ideas of what a lady should or should not be."

The cost of participating in the club can be prohibitive; fees run into the thousands of dollars (not to mention the cost of dresses, gloves and other accessories). Most of the debutantes come from privileged back-

grounds but, Dr. Clark noted, "You can ask for community support." One of this year's debutantes described having "what you would call a fairy godmother" who sponsored her application.

Girls are selected for each year's cohort based on their personal, extracurricular and educational achievements. Ultimately, the goal is to prepare them to take on the mantle of future leaders of the community.

What the debutante club means to the cohort of 2023 varies. They speak with sincerity about the beauty of their dresses and wanting to feel like princesses.

But the girls also form a profound bond over the months they spend together. "This time in-between, getting ready to go from high school to college, is when these relationships that you build with other young women are essential," Davis said.

"They can be your friends for the rest of your life," she said. "My cousin actually did this ball 10 years ago, and she's still very, very close with her debutante sisters."

One of the most meaningful experiences, the girls said, was a sleepover arranged by the society. "It gave us a chance to just be teenagers," Galloway said. By the time of the ball, they felt more mature — as if the process had been a step toward adulthood.

"I always thought, 'This is just a ceremony,'" said Avery Roberson, 17. "But doing it and seeing your mom, your parents, any of your viewers, tearing up — now it feels like I really am grown up."

The girls and the organizers are aware of the elitist perception of debutante culture. The balls have been criticized for being heteronormative and anti-feminist. "We cannot gloss over the ways in which they can and do subordinate respectability politics and uphold white, European beauty standards that are destructive to the psyche of young Black women," the researcher Karla Mendez wrote for the blog Black Women Radicals.

The Cotillion Society has worked to reframe the ball from an antiquated mating ritual to a launching pad for the girls' academic and professional ambitions. Detroit is the most segregated city in the United States, according to a 2021 study from the Othring and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley. Many of the debutantes grew up in largely white areas where, beyond their families, it was difficult to find role models who looked like them or peers who understood the challenges they'd faced.

The cotillion offers them a network that can support and mentor them as they enter this next chapter of adulthood.

Sitting in predominantly white schools all day, "you're not around your culture at all," Davis said. The ball was "a special moment: to be surrounded by young Black women who had goals and aspirations."

The unabashed Blackness of the cotillion was welcomed by many of the debutantes.

"It felt like being introduced to a bigger world of opportunities for us as Black youth," said Childs, who is considering becoming a lawyer to fight for oppressed groups.

"Being a young Black girl is very powerful," Childs said. But, she added, "there are still people that don't necessarily believe in themselves that way."

"I want them to know that they are welcome in these types of spaces."



The Cotillion Society of Detroit Educational Foundation prepares young Black debutantes. The program, founded by Dr. Renita Clark, left (shown with her daughter Lexi, a 2022 debutante), presented nearly 30 women this year, including, top from left, Madison Galloway, Meraiah Williams and Elona Baker.



CONTINUED ON FOLLOWING PAGE

Where We Are

# The Cotillion: A Step Toward Adulthood



Every year, the Cotillion Society's ball is the culmination of about eight months of etiquette lessons, leadership workshops, community service projects and cultural events. Many of the debutantes say they were changed by the experience.

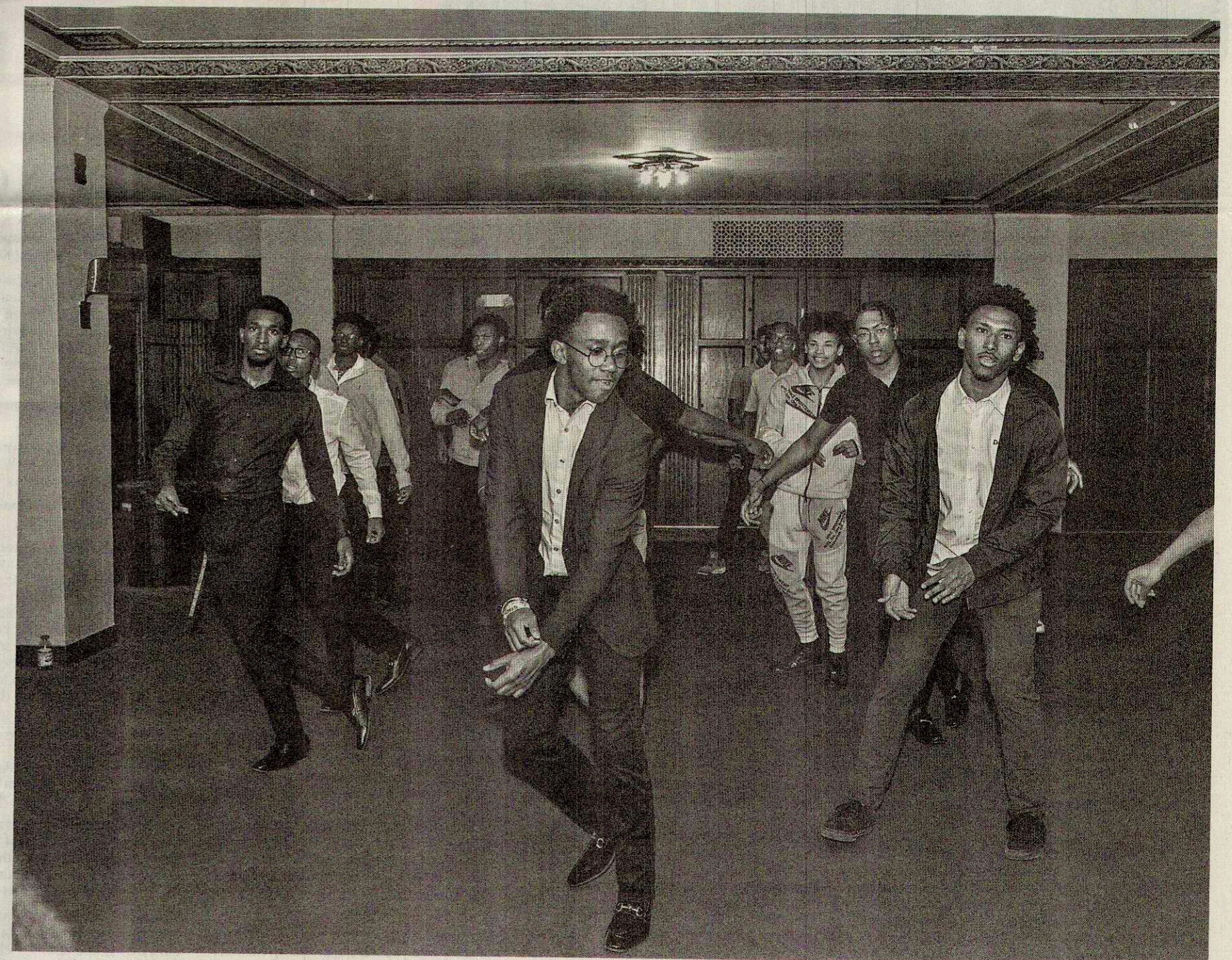


Young men who serve as escorts take part in a similar educational program that includes sessions on etiquette, chivalry and financial literacy. They also spend time rehearsing the dances that are part of the evening's events.

The cotillion experience is not just about fancy dresses and ballroom dancing. "This time in-between, getting ready to go from high school to college, is when these relationships that you build with other young women are essential," said Skye Davis, right, one of this year's debutantes.



Fathers or father figures accompany the young women for parts of the ball but then step aside for younger dance partners. The young women also support one another with "pep talks" and other activities that promote bonding.



**'AMPLIFYING IDEAS OF CELEBRATION'**  
Born in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island in a Caribbean American household, Miranda Barnes has been making pictures since she was a teenager. She began pursuing photography professionally while studying humanities and justice at John Jay College and initially found that her fascination with race and politics influenced her artistic practice. Her first major commission (for The New York Times in 2018) was covering events commemorating the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Over time, she became more interested in photography that captured everyday life, especially in images "amplifying ideas of celebration." This brought her into the world of Black debutante balls. "I appreciate any type of institution that is priding itself on Black culture and keeping traditions alive," she said. In 2022, she contacted Dr. Renita Clark, who runs the Cotillion Society of Detroit Educational Foundation, and struck a deal: Clark would let Barnes photograph the proceedings and, while she was there, Barnes would also take family portraits for the debutantes. She was invited back to photograph the ball again this year. Her goal with every project is to create something more substantial than a typical quick portrait. "I'm trying to make these images that last," she said.  
CHARLIE BRINKHURST-CUFF