Nine years ago
sophomore Martin Pierre
created a character-building club for
black men on campus. The members of
the Talented Tenth have all
graduated, but their love and
commitment remain

BY BRUCE MORGAN

Michael Gaines ’91, glanced up during his mother’s wake at a
Roxbury funeral home in the fall of 1987 and saw them across the
room: half-a-dozen young men in dark suits who had come to pay their respects. Gaines recognized the men immediately. Although he had been a student at Boston College just a few weeks, he knew all the black faces on the mostly white campus. “Michael, we’re here for you,” the men told him.

The men at the wake were members of a small, new student organization that called itself the Talented Tenth. Gaines attended his first club meeting soon afterward. “It was a source of family,” he says. “Being there, you had the feeling you were going

The 1995 reunion: (top, left to right) Robert Ross ’91, Gene Redd ’91, Hervé Clermont*, Chad Bishop ’91, Bobby Moran ’91; (below) James Jean-Pierre ’91, Michael Sanders ’90, Sid Levy*, Martin Pierre ’89, Clifford Isaac ’90, Reggie Cadet ’90, William Gibson*, John Dowling ’91, Michael Gaines ’91, Ray Sykes ’90.
*did not attend Boston College

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEOFF WHY
to be connected with this group of individuals and you wouldn’t go wrong.”

That instinct proved to be true. For Gaines and the other twenty or so African-American men who were part of the Talented Tenth between 1986 and 1992, the link would become a central force in their lives. It is one that sustains them still.

The organization drew its name from the writings of the eminent black scholar and civil-rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois. A founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Du Bois believed that as a black middle class emerged, those lucky enough to advance socially and economically—a group he called the Talented Tenth—should reach down and lift other, less-advantaged blacks to higher ground. “Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character?” he asked in his 1903 book, The Negro Problem. “Was there ever a nation on God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters . . .”

The concept of the Talented Tenth failed to take hold in U.S. society the way Du Bois had hoped, observes Donald Brown, director of AHANA student programs at BC. “In the end, Dr. Du Bois became very, very discouraged,” Brown says. “A black bourgeoisie was formed, but there was not enough concern about uplifting the masses. I do think he was onto something, however. The lion’s share of black folk are not in colleges or universities . . . Those who do [make it to college] are blessed.” It was Don Brown who suggested the name Talented Tenth when a soft-spoken sophomore named Martin Pierre came to see him in the spring of 1986, hoping to start a club for black men on campus.

Gaining altitude

Last July the men of the Talented Tenth gathered, as they do every summer, for a reunion on Martha’s Vineyard. Rain dripped from the eaves of the rambling gingerbread cottage Martin Pierre had rented in Oak Bluffs, a summer camp established by middle-class blacks in the late 1800s. The cottage was packed. A few men lounged on the porch, trading quips and ironies. More were in the kitchen, rustling up some lunch. A small group played cards in the living room; now and then whoops of laughter caromed off the porch into the tree-lined street beyond.

When Pierre first approached Don Brown about starting the club, the emotion that drove him was loneliness. An African American and a Brooklyn, New York, native, he was adrift in the sea of white, suburban faces that was Boston College, and he suspected that same isolation was hindering other black men as well. “I wanted to connect with other people in order to get through BC,” Pierre says. “I thought it made sense to create a group that would help us negotiate our way.”

With support from black administrators Don Brown and Dan Bunch, Pierre conceived of a character-building club in which black men would mentor one another and elevate themselves incrementally. From the start, admission standards to the Talented Tenth were stringent. Applicants, who had to be nominated by a member, had to maintain a GPA of 3.0 or better. Each was asked to write a series of 500-word essays on designated topics: “What are your life goals?” was one. “Please describe your leadership potential” was another. Members were expected to dress properly for the weekly or biweekly meetings, to be punctual and to behave like gentlemen once there.

“We wanted our members to leave the street mentality at home,” explains Steve Pemberton ’89.
"If you came to a meeting without a shirt and tie, you had to go home and change. If you referred to women in a derogatory fashion, we checked you on it."

By making the club selective and demanding, Pierre made it serious. "This was not a social club," says Hervé François '90. "If you wanted to dillydally around, then you went and joined the Dilly-dally Club." The Talented Tenth was to be a crucible and a launching pad; its goal, a brotherhood of proud, articulate, community-minded achievers.

Among the members gathered on the Vineyard in July—men still in their twenties—mainstream success is the common glinting coin: businessmen and lawyers, graduate students and academic administrators, they are accruing the marks of influence. Alongside the porch, three spiffy new sports cars sit parked in the mud.

Robert James '89, a Pittsburgh lawyer studying for his MBA, says earning money and acquiring advanced degrees are indeed a big part of the Tenth agenda. Badges of success are especially important for black men in a white society, explains John Dowling '91, an accountant in a New York City law firm. "We're not expected, so to speak, to do well," he says, so yardsticks are critical. At the same time, however, the men of the Tenth see themselves as change agents in a debilitated black America.

AHANA's Don Brown rattles off the numbers. One million black men are in prison, accounting for 47 percent of the total inmate population in the United States. One-fourth of all black men are on probation or on parole. The unemployment rate for African-American males hovers at about 12 percent, more than twice the national average; for black teenagers the rate is a staggering 44 percent. Historically, welfare requirements have discouraged black men from staying with their families. "All of these ills," says Brown, "contribute to a dearth of black males in the home."

Giving other African Americans a lift honors the high-minded spirit and vision of Du Bois. But there is more at work here than the pledging of allegiance to an icon. As one reunion participant expresses it: "When we take off the suits and put down the briefcases, who are we as people?"

The identity war

At the initial meeting of the Talented Tenth in the fall of 1986, club members took turns telling their life stories, each first describing his family and neighborhood and then sketching the path by which he had arrived at BC.

Steve Pemberton's story stood out. When he was five years old, growing up in a rough section of New Bedford, Massachusetts, his father was murdered in a drug deal. The killers threatened to come after Steve next. The courts determined that his mother, who was white and an alcoholic, was an unfit parent, and placed him in foster care.

Pemberton calls the next 11 years of his life "a living hell." His foster parents scorned his efforts to widen his horizons through education. They flicked off the lights whenever they saw him try to read, and beat him when they caught him scanning the newspaper. "They broke everything but my spirit," says Pemberton matter-of-factly. Asked to name men he admired growing up, he hesitates. "I remember the postman," he says finally.

Pemberton's experiences made him an edgy survivor. "I was always looking over my shoulder, worried about getting home safe," he says. For him, arriving at BC bore a meaning the average white suburban student could not fathom. "Usually when you go off to college, you're supposed to be breaking away from your family," he says. "When I arrived, I was looking for a family."

It took a year to find it. Living among white classmates on the Newton campus—there was only one other African American in his residence hall, Pemberton says—he spent a lot of time educating his peers about black life. Over time, the strain wore on him. "My experience freshman year sparked a desire in me to find a situation where I wouldn't have to do so much educating," he says.

His sophomore year, the Talented Tenth came together. In it, Pemberton says, he found "a sense of belonging, a sense of identification with people who understood my struggles." He was able to let down his guard, freed from the pressure of serving as a spokesman for his race.
Club meetings enabled Pemberton and the other members to steel themselves against two kinds of psychological assault that they experienced daily. The first had to do with the lack of respect accorded African-American students on most campuses. Pemberton says black college students are presumed to be either athletes (61 percent of African-American males on Division I-A college campuses are recruited athletes) or affirmative-action cases given a free ride. Rarely, he says, do black students find recognition for what they have achieved. “If you took the average person on this campus and put them back in our neighborhoods, they wouldn’t survive,” he charges. “So the issue becomes not Can we survive in your world? but Could you have survived in ours? If we made it here, we deserve your respect. For the majority of people on this campus, going to college is an afterthought, a question of where. For us, it was a question of if. Just to get into that dormitory over there was a very long road for some of us.”

In addition, black students continually combat a pervasive, warped view of black life that threatens their self-images. “This society always sees the worst of us,” Pemberton says. “Hustling, pimps, people who’ve always got a basketball in their hand—these are the images we grew up with. As an African American, you find yourself in a cultural war over your identity. It comes down to who you are, and who you know yourself to be, versus how the society defines you.”

History makes the difference. As a high-achieving black male, Pemberton is keenly aware of the symbolic burden he bears and of the bitter cultural history that shadows his own achievement. “We are the men our fathers would have become,” he says quietly. “I think about that every single day. I carry my father’s life with me.” To honor his dad’s memory, in 1991 Steve changed his last name to Pemberton from Klakowicz, his mother’s first husband’s name, which Steve was given so the family could receive welfare benefits.

Now a senior assistant director in BC’s Office of Undergraduate Admission, Pemberton has made it a personal goal to recruit talented young men and women from his old New Bedford neighborhood and to give them the encouragement he never had. When he came to Boston College, he was the only student from that neighborhood; now there are a dozen.

“They call me Big Daddy or Big Brother,” he says with a quick, gratified smile. “That’s the Talented Tenth working.”

**Pilot light**

At first glance, Martin Pierre seems an unlikely leader. Modest and unassuming by nature, he has a trace of a lisp and a sweet, rippling laugh that catches you off guard. But with his low-key determination, Pierre drove the whole rollicking and earnest enterprise.

Back in the early 1980s, living in Brooklyn, Pierre was an exceptional high-school student—he graduated as valedictorian and captain of the track team—caught up in an activity called the Bishop’s Leadership Project. The program was designed to build leadership potential among local teens through a series of challenging workshops and retreats. Through it, Pierre developed a sorcerer’s touch for bringing out the latent talent and power in those around him.

A sensitive, disciplined student who knew his black history cold and who could and would recite pages of black poetry from memory, Pierre was a natural point man in the drive toward self-esteem among his peers. He had the passion, the skills and the subtle charisma to bring it off. “Martin is a very
positive person who has a great deal of pride in black America and wants to see the positives out there,” his BC roommate Robert James observes. “At our meetings he would say, ‘Let’s discuss issues, and let’s discuss solutions.’”

Pierre’s diplomacy was put to the test when African-American women on campus got mad at the creation of a black group that barred them. “It was a shock,” remembers Antonia Soarez ’91, JD’94. “They were organized; they were together. Everyone felt, man, I want to be part of that.” When Soarez approached Pierre and some other members about joining, she found them “all very level-headed. They told me, ‘We need to do this for ourselves. If we can come together and talk, you will see us in a self-respecting way.’” Pierre suggested that the women create their own club and that the two clubs meet jointly once a month to enrich each other’s perspectives.

The women took the suggestion. Their club (called Umoja, a Swahili term for “in unity there is strength”) lasted a semester or so. “Talking to my friends now, in retrospect, we think, how silly were we?” says Soarez. “We basically had a lot of heated women who wanted to be part of something we didn’t understand.”

As a campus organization limited to African-American men, the Talented Tenth existed in a gray area as far as the University was concerned. “We were discriminating, so we couldn’t be recognized as a BC student group,” Pierre explains. The club received no financial assistance, but administrators helped find meeting spaces and gave the men general advice on how to run meetings, book bands and speakers, and otherwise proceed within the bounds of campus protocol.

Pierre and his friends were left to determine the tone and the content of what went on in the Tenth, and what being a member would mean. They made up the rules from scratch. They doled out the assignments. They kept one another in line. Pemberton believes that the club succeeded in large degree “because it wasn’t top down, administration run.” The club was free to succeed or fail on its own terms, led by a sophomore who had never attempted anything so grand before.

Robert James watched Pierre in action on many a Friday night. “Other people would be going out to a keg party,” James recalls. “Martin might be organizing a meeting—getting the food, finding a room, calling up the brothers to see if they got there. He was the heart and soul of the organization.”

However, Pierre was careful to pass the organizational burdens around. Members took turns scheduling meeting times and places, determining content for the sessions, and promoting campuswide events such as the annual Spring Fling formal dance. Many devoted time on the weekends to Project 2000, a program they created to prepare a fourth-grade class in Dorchester for admission to college in the year 2000. (AHANA now administers the project.) A different member ran every meeting. “The club wasn’t about Martin being in charge; it was more about our being in charge,” Pierre stresses. “What I wanted the members to do

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—even in high school, I was involved in going beyond the simple mechanics of ‘take.’**

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was to assume the mantle of leadership."

A consequence was that the incentive to improve one’s life came at members from every side, like barometric pressure, rather than from above, like rain. “They took me and worked on me and got me involved in student life,” says Anderson Manuel ’90, M.Ed. ’93, of the peer jostling that characterized club meetings. A Boston native and a restaurant manager, Manuel entered BC as a shy student wanting nothing more out of life than to make money. But in the Tenth he honed his leadership and speaking skills. He became the treasurer of several campus organizations, a UGBC senator, and president of the Black Student Forum by his senior year.

Other students were cajoled into quickening their pace along a path they’d already chosen. When Mike Gaines wonders at the chain of events that brought him to Harvard Business School, where he is now in his second year, he credits the infectious determination to strive for excellence that he met in the Tenth. “Why have I been so fortunate? A lot of it was people saying, ‘Get on the ball. Don’t wait. It’s time to get to work right now,’” he says. It was the prodding of his friends that led him to seek out and win a series of prestigious summer internships with federal banks and corporate investment firms at BC.

The men created a tailwind for one another. “Seeing the concerted efforts from everyone to do as well as they could made me want to do more,” says Bobby Moran ’91, now a labor relations specialist at a New York City hospital.

The buddy groove was just a start. Men in the Tenth realized that those with the gravest social needs were not likely to be found in sunny classrooms on the Heights; rather, they were wasting away in the sorts of dead-end urban neighborhods that most Tenth members had so recently escaped. “One of the most important things we did was teach one another to be visionaries,” says Gene Redd ’91. “We try never to forget that there are things greater than you and me and him and our individual circumstances.”

Among his friends, Redd is the kind of guy who gets ribbed a lot for his efforts to shift all talk in a spiritual direction. A born preacher, he takes the ribbing good-naturedly—he laughs, then goes right on preaching. “Growing up, I was always blessed with a giving spirit,” he says. “But the Tenth directed me and gave me focus. They taught me a way to plan and direct effectively, to change the lives of others.” These days, Redd works as a loan officer in a bank in Queens, New York, but in his spare time he makes it a point to drive through nearby drug-filled neighborhoods and catch the attention of kids hanging out on the street.

“They see me driving a very nice car. That’s what gets them to look, and then they come over to talk,” Redd says. Once he snags his audience, he gets serious. “I explain principles they’ll need in life. We talk about powerful words like ‘responsibility’ or ‘manhood’ or respect.” His girlfriend and I will make up a sheet of words for them to memorize; then maybe we’ll all go to a movie.” Redd has been carrying his tonic message to the streets of Queens for the past two years.

Raymond Sykes ’90, sings a similar tune among the residents of his old neighborhood in New Haven, Connecticut, where he is starting a storefront criminal-law practice. “There are people in my neighborhood who aren’t doing much with their lives,” he says. “Through me, they’re seeing a young brother who’s doing it.”

Neighborhood kids—and men and women in their twenties, too—frequently come up to him and say, “Hey, man, are you a lawyer? Is it hard?” To which he invariably responds, “Yeah, it’s hard, but you’ve got to take it one step at a time. First you go to grade school, then high school, then you go to college, then law school. I tell them, ‘It’s never too late. You just need to have a plan.’”

Moving on

The men of the Talented Tenth never did much to recruit new members, and by 1992 they resembled one of those chaste Shaker colonies fast dwindling in the knobby New England hills; as its members graduated, the club became extinct. What has lasted, however, is the bond among
those who came through the fire together at BC. They are as tight-knit and fervent in their collective scheming as ever. "As we move on in our stations in life, we take our struggle to higher levels," Pemberton says. "We acquire the influence to change the situation for others like us."

Sykes may be typical. Once his law practice is firmly established, perhaps three years from now, he plans to set up a program in New Haven to help neighborhood teens get into college. He envisions hiring teachers to assist kids in filling out application forms and securing financial aid. "To a lot of people, everything's a mystery," Sykes says. "I had my mom to help me, but friends of mine didn't have that kind of help, so they couldn't figure out the financial-aid forms and didn't get as far."

Other members of the Tenth are batting around the possibility of setting up an equity fund to buy property in the inner city. Could we create a community center of some kind by pooling our money? A panel of business-school grads is looking into the matter.

What makes, and has made, the whole enterprise tick is nothing more complicated than the tenderness these men have for one another—love expressed a thousand ways. When they pack themselves into the tiny kitchen of the Vineyard cottage to fix lunch, the room crackles with affection. Out on the porch they brush hands in passing, smiling faintly and nodding as they do.

The men express their love in other, more practical ways as well. Hervé François, who earned his MBA from Georgetown in 1994, helped Mike Gaines sharpen his business-school applications. (François had served on the admissions committee at Georgetown during his two years there and knew which notes to hit.) When Gaines was admitted to Harvard, François gave him his books.

Tenth members are in frequent, even daily contact, and to an outsider the connections can be dizzying. Gaines was camping at Pierre's mother's house in Brooklyn while working at the investment firm Goldman Sachs this past summer. François shares a Brooklyn apartment with Reggie Cadet '90, and James Jean-Pierre '91, and bumps into Gaines and Clifford Isaac '90, around town periodically. Chad Bishop '91, uses the apartment for a crash pad now and again.

"What will we look like next year or the year after that?" Gaines wonders aloud from his chair on the porch of the Oak Bluffs cottage. "Our lifestyles will change, but we are committed to staying together." The first wedding for a Tenth man came this summer, when Michael Sanders '90, stepped up to the altar. "We'll go to one another's weddings," predicts Moran, standing beside Gaines and looking out into a summer drizzle. "It's just that in a few years, instead of our having one house, we'll have one house here and one over there"—he points across the street—and one over there [next door]. Our kids will be running around the yard, playing together."

The tale seems too good to be true; how and why the original Talented Tenth managed to rise and shine remains baffling, even to those involved. Was it because a matchless few African-American students happened to convene on campus in the late 1980s and to like one another's company? Was it because some people were feeling lonely and hungered for a cure? Was it magic? "The mechanism, the chemistry, the times—whatever it was, it worked," says Pierre.

Bruce Morgan is this magazine's associate editor.