

Michigan
Women's
HALL OF FAME



Les Meres et Debutantes of Greater Lansing

Inducted: 2012

Era: Historical Group: African American

Area(s) of Achievement: Community Service

In 1962, a group of nine African American mothers, Esther Abrams, Hortense Canady, Lela Eaton, Mattie Foxall, Robbie Harris, Catherine Harrison, Estella Saunders, Shirley Wills, and Dorothy Wilson created Les Meres et Debutantes Club of Greater Lansing. Formed at a time when white social clubs refused membership to African Americans, these nine mothers sought to present their daughters to society by preparing them to fulfill roles as productive young women.

The organization was unique because Les Meres 'the mothers' provided all of the programming, mentoring, and funding for the debutantes, the daughters. The Club focused on developing the debutantes' academic, civic, social, and moral strengths and created a venue to showcase their accomplishments. This 'coming of age' process began in the seventh grade and culminated in a formal ball 'The Cotillion' in the twelfth grade.

Since its inception, the club has met the needs of hundreds of girls and has welcomed the daughters of former debutantes. The club's alumni include many successful women such as Alexa Irene Canady, the first and youngest African-American woman neurosurgeon in the United States and a 1989 Michigan Women's Hall of Fame Inductee; Anita Riddle-Johnson, the first African-American woman General Motors Executive from Lansing; and Luanne Wills-Merrell, the first African-American female aviation safety inspector hired by the Federal Aviation Administration.