With all of the buzz at “NSBE40” — Young Guru’s inspirational messages, the first-ever Family Reunion, insightful workshops, NSBEpreneur topics — for many, the National Chapters of the Year awards topped the charts for memorable moments at the National Society of Black Engineers’ (NSBE’s) 40th Annual Convention. The ballroom at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center in Nashville, Tenn., went quiet last March 29, just before the winners were announced. Tawakalit Sulaiman, a senior in civil engineering, remembers the moment when her chapter, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, was named Small Chapter of the Year. She screamed, “What!” with a huge smile on her face.

“It was an amazing feeling to hear my school’s name,” says Sulaiman, 19, of Calumet City, Ill. She felt especially rewarded because, as last year’s Academic Excellence chair, she was heavily involved with “NSBE UIUC” and its efforts to improve the graduation rates of blacks in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). She was sitting separately from the other Region IV attendees and quickly decided to join them, but it took a while for the news to sink in.

“I knew how great of a chapter we had but didn’t think we would be recognized nationally,” says Sulaiman, who is chapter vice president this year. The recognition was important, she adds, but not as crucial as NSBE’s positive impact on the campus and community, and its role in “shaping the world of technology.”

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HIGHEST HONORS
National Chapter of the Year is the highest award a NSBE collegiate chapter can receive. It recognizes the chapter that best exemplifies excellence in pursuing the organization’s mission. This year, in addition to UIUC’s Small Chapter of the Year achievement, the University of Pittsburgh garnered the Large Chapter of the Year award, and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville was named Medium Chapter of the Year. NSBE had 231 collegiate chapters and more than 31,000 members at the end of its last program year, making it one of the largest student-governed organizations based in the U.S.

For industrial engineering senior Marcus Jordan, hearing that the University of Pittsburgh had won Large Chapter of the Year was like a dream come true: the culmination of months of hard work by the members, including him, the chapter president. Incoming President Robert E. Timmons II was also thrilled.

“I was filled with joy and excitement, knowing that we were able to reach our goal,” says Timmons, who crossed the country from Houston to study electrical engineering at Pitt. The Region II “Pitt NSBE” chapter demonstrated its dedication to achieving NSBE’s goals by hosting week-long “Study-A-Thons” geared toward helping freshmen prepare for finals week and by hosting “A Walk for Education,” which exposed middle school and high school students to STEM careers. Other activities included tutoring, and helping youth conduct science experiments.

SECOND FAMILY
Meanwhile, at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, “NSBE UTK” took the theme “Our Dream, Our Family, Our NSBE” to heart. Members tried to provide a less intimidating atmosphere for students by making it easier to get to activities such as study halls, networking events and general body meetings.

“What we tried to do (last) year was make NSBE a family,” says Diamond Wallace, who was 2013–14 president of the chapter. She points with pride to NSBE UTK’s premier event, “Mini-SEEK” (Summer Engineering Experience for Kids), which gave elementary school students exposure to STEM careers through interactive games and activities. Because of Mini-SEEK, 120 students in grades 3 to 6 got an up-close look at engineering.

“The program is our chapter’s way of showing these children that STEM is not impossible for minority students,” says Wallace, a senior who has returned as president and hopes to pursue her doctorate in cell and tissue engineering. While working on these and other programs with her fellow NSBE members, Wallace learned new ways of approaching leadership, whether by finding sponsors such as ExxonMobil Corporation and Denso Manufacturing or by challenging the Chapter Executive Board to encourage more member participation.

“What we tried to do (last) year was make NSBE a family.”
— Diamond Wallace, University of Tennessee at Knoxville

University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Medium Chapter of the Year
ERS OF THE YEAR

student, said no one had ever seen as many NSBE members in the library as gathered there this past year. Often the occasion was a NSBE “Buddies” meeting, a mentorship program that connected seniors with freshmen.

“We got the conversation started, and people were amazed at how much they shared: concerns about excelling academically, overcoming obstacles, being a black engineering student at UIUC and so much more,” Sulaiman says.

There were other chapter events, too: a workshop on “How to Gain Employment with a Not-So-Stellar GPA”; tech talks; even tips on speed-reading textbooks.

FIRE INSIDE

But ultimately, says Sulaiman, what she gained from her participation in the NSBE chapter was “an incredible family.” From group studying in the library until 2 a.m., to midnight food runs, to hilarious visits to the NSBE office between classes, NSBE provided support and camaraderie. For Sulaiman, who transferred to UIUC in her sophomore year, NSBE was a great way to meet other students.

“It was great to have a family of people who were like me and yet so diverse,” she says. “And I was so impressed by the opportunities available, such as scholarships, career development and community involvement.”

The NSBE Annual Convention truly was a display of “Engineering and Leadership in Harmony,” as its theme stated, and members of the University of Pittsburgh chapter look forward to 2018, when the convention will return to their city once again. But as far as NSBE’s value to its members, Amber Nixon, current vice president of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville NSBE chapter, maybe sums it up best. When she found that UT Knoxville had been announced as Medium Chapter of the Year, she knew that all of the efforts over the year had not been in vain. She felt proud of the NSBE UTK members and executive board, but, most of all, at that moment, she realized how proud she was to be part of such an accomplished society of engineers.

“Talking about NSBE gives me such an excited feeling that it’s indescribable,” she says. “It’s almost as though a fire is burning inside of me to show what I can do and what NSBE has taught me.”

Cindy Atoji is a Boston-based blogger and editor who specializes in diversity issues and technology writing.

“...and technology writing.

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– Tawakalit Sulaiman,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

UIUC NSBE members at a Tech Talk held by the chapter with two graduate students, during the 2013–14 program year.

University of Pittsburgh members at the 2013 NSBE Annual Convention.

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