NEWS

"Now that it's raining more than ever, know that we'll still have each other, you can stand under my umbrella"
UMBRELLA BY RIHANNA

Beloved Yale Public Safety dog Heidi celebrates retirement

BY REETI MALHOTRA AND SARAH MUKKUZHI
STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Around 50 members of the Yale community and over a dozen dogs, including Harvard's police dog, gathered to celebrate the retirement of Yale's public safety dog, Heidi, on Monday afternoon.

The six-year-old yellow lab arrived at Yale in early September 2020, according to her biography. Originally brought to the University to improve relations between Yale police officers and the broader community, she quickly became a fixture in mental health and legal support services for Yale students and community members.

"To the wide majority of people, she's kind of just feel-good, nice-to-have," Margaret Kuo SOM '25 said. "She shows up at large events and just spreads smiles. But Heidi does incredible work individually that a lot of people don't see because it is so vulnerable and it's so private."

Heidi was trained by Puppies Behind Bars, a Manhattan-based organization that "trains incarcerated individuals to raise service dogs for wounded war veterans and first responders, facility dogs for police departments, and explosive-detection canines for law enforcement," according to the organization's website.

She was reared in prison by incarcerated workers from the time she was eight weeks old, the organization's founder Gloria Gilbert Stoga said. The process, according to the organization, costs about $50,000 per dog.

Following her arrival to campus, Heidi became a public personality, currently boasting over 15,000 followers on Instagram and often being sighted as a frequent companion of Handsome Dan, the University's mascot.

"Heidi was his first friend," Kassandra Haro '18, Handsome Dan's handler, said at the event. "That's the first dog he met."

She also became a valuable resource and a source of support in a bogged-down mental health support landscape, according to community members.

Ella King '28 is a student in Silliman College who struggles with somatic post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, which involves the physical manifestation of emotional distress, she said. During her first year, she began to meet with Heidi on a weekly basis.

"I found a little bit of difficulty working with Yale's mental health services," King said. "Getting weekly therapy, for whatever reason, wasn't available to me in my first year. But it was available with Team Heidi, which was awesome."

King described Heidi as a valuable mental wellness resource, pointing to both the dog's training with deescalation for those struggling with PTSD and the willingness of Officer Rich Simons — Heidi's handler and owner — to make on-call visits.

Kuo added that Heidi, along with Simons, would meet with medical students after the anatomy lab — an exercise when medical students practice skills on cadavers — and sexual assault victims testifying against their perpetrators in court. Kuo, who met Heidi after a particularly difficult midterm, credited Heidi's "calming" presence with bringing community members together during adverse circumstances.

Stoga lauded Simons' personality and close relationship with Heidi as instrumental factors in the pair's success.

"They're a perfect team because Rich's whole persona is just to make somebody's day better," Stoga said in an interview at the event. "People in crisis' lives have been changed because of that dog. She's a rockstar at Yale."

Simons declined to speak to the News, citing concerns about facing discipline for speaking to the press amid ongoing contract negotiations between the University and the Yale Police union.

His wife, Michelle Eligio, highlighted the 27 years Simons spent convincing the department to hire Heidi and the dog's subsequent success.

"He's taken the program very far from its inception," Eligio said. "It's a credit not only to him but also to the dog, Heidi. Out of all the dogs, she's very unique. She's very friendly, happy and loves to greet everybody."

According to King, Heidi is set to continue her service with Simons at New Haven schools after her retirement. The University has not announced any arrangements to replace Heidi or adopt a similar public safety dog.

Heidi has received several accolades during her tenure as Yale's public safety dog, including the Linda Lorimer Award for Distinguished Service. The award was presented to both Heidi — its first canine recipient — and Simons in 2022.

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XIMENA SOLORZANO / HEAD PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

Attendees at Monday's retirement party said the six-year-old yellow lab provides essential mental health support for Yale students and community members

$1.2 million YCC budget passes, boosting Spring Fling funding

BY ASHER BOISKIN
STAFF REPORTER

The Yale College Council Senate approved its $1.2 million budget Sunday after more than 90 minutes of debate, resolving a two-week standoff over how much money to allocate for Spring Fling, the annual end-of-year concert that accounts for more than a third of YCC spending.

Senators voted on Sunday to allocate $440,000 to the event, but attached conditions to $20,000 of the funds. Under the plan, Spring Fling will only receive that final tranche in October if it provides monthly updates, shares information about its artist selection process and demonstrates financial need for the funding.

"If Spring Fling upholds these stipulations, then they'll receive the $20,000," YCC Speaker Alex William Chen '28 said in the meeting.

The vote capped two weeks of debate over the concert budget. Last week, senators approved an amendment to the YCC budget by Joseph Elsayyid '26 that reduced the allocation from $440,116 to $420,000, matching what University administrators had described as the minimum cost for the event.

The remaining $20,000 became the focal point of Sunday's debate, and senators split over whether to release the money to Spring Fling immediately or to withhold it as leverage.

Spring Fling organizers — Talent Chair Mateo Félix '27, Hospitality and Operations Chair Lelah Shapiro '27, Production Chair Jalen Freeman '27 and Creative Chair Sophie Peetz '28 — began Sunday's meeting with a presentation justifying the increased request.

"Our main goal is planning a free festival that all Yale students can enjoy," Shapiro said. "Spring Fling is free not only for students, but also their guests."

Freeman told the chamber that "production and security are the biggest non-negotiables," while Félix pointed to rising prices.

"Inflation is happening," Félix said. "It's very pronounced in the entertainment industry."

Last year, the YCC budgeted around $350,000 for Spring Fling — a third of their budget of roughly $930,000.

In the 90 minutes of debate, some senators favored releasing the additional $20,000 to Spring Fling immediately.

Chen's amendment, which Timothy Dwight senators Cyrus Sadeghi '27 and Alexander Medel '27 helped write, proposed holding the $20,000 in reserve to ensure transparency from Spring Fling organizers. But Elsayyid and Kingson Wills '26, the YCC events director, countered with a rival amendment that would have restored the full amount to Spring Fling immediately, arguing that delays would weaken organizers' ability to book performers.

"Since transparency can be secured regardless, it is more effective to release the funds now, allowing Spring Fling to negotiate earlier and secure better pricing," Elsayyid wrote to the News.

The chamber split sharply.

"We wasted an entire week of debate and discourse that could have been spent on other elements of the YCC, including other proposals that could have directly benefited FGLI students," Saybrook Senator Brendan Kaminski '28 said, referring to first-generation or low-income students. "It feels kind of artificial that we're all of a sudden bumping it up to $440,000."

Others defended the drawn-out process.

Elsayyid noted that this extended debate was part of the job of a YCC senator.

"It's the most engaged process in actual democratic deliberations that I've seen in all four of my years," he said.

Over the past two weeks, Elsayyid has held meetings for senators to discuss the YCC budget.

"We've got an incredibly active group that doesn't just rubber stamp proposals, but is more than willing to get into the weeds and scrutinize every aspect of them," YCC President Andrew Boanoh '27 wrote in a statement to the News.

Senators also discussed whether the conditions attached to the extra $20,000 would actually increase accountability. Wills and Elsayyid argued that the Senate could use existing constitutional measures for oversight of the Spring Fling budget.

Ultimately, Chen's amendment prevailed. The Senate rejected the Wills-Elsayyid proposal by a 12-8 vote and then approved the overall budget as amended by a 21-2 vote.

"This budget does an excellent job of balancing needs within the YCC while also giving the general student body a look into operations they've historically had no view into," Boanoh wrote.

Boanoh highlighted that this finalized proposal includes the largest allocations in history, alongside increased transparency, for the Spring Fling committee.

"As Spring Fling Chairs, we are very happy with the outcome of this Senate meeting and the budget that was passed this morning," Shapiro wrote in a statement to the News.

The chamber postponed votes on delegate approvals and Adobe software funding until its next meeting.

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GARRETT CURTIS / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

After two weeks of debate, the Yale College Council Senate approved its budget, opting to provide $440,000 to Spring Fling.

Students ring in Ethiopian and Eritrean New Year on Beinecke Plaza

BY KAMALA GURURAJA
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Students gathered Sunday to ring in the Ethiopian and Eritrean New Year at Beinecke Plaza.

The event was organized by the Yale Ethiopian and Eritrean Students Association, or YEESA, an organization of students with Ethiopian and Eritrean roots. The celebration was open to all and included a performance by Desta, Yale's Ethiopian-Eritrean Dance Team.

"It's definitely been a labor of love. It has been a lot of behind the scenes work but also something that we are all so passionate and excited to pour into" Seline Mesfin '27, one of the event's organizers, said.

This year, they celebrated the start of 2018, which officially began on Sept. 11. The Ethiopian and Eritrean calendars, which are the same and based on the Coptic calendar, are around seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar.

Many attendees donned traditional Ethiopian and Eritrean clothing and YEESA also served traditional Ethiopian and Eritrean food, such as injera — a pancake-like flatbread.

Hilldana Tibebu '27, YEESA president, noted the importance of the New Year celebration for students looking to celebrate their home culture with their Yale community.

Though Tibebu described YEESA as a "more recent" organization, the New Year celebration was also held last year. Tibebu added that the main goal of YEESA is to "give a home to students" at Yale while also connecting to their culture back home.

"Structurally it is very similar in the sense that we are coming to celebrate one another and our cultures with a lot of shared elements like food, music, dance," Mesfin said. "We do want to try and spin things a little bit to keep people on their toes and keep people interested."

Many attendees noted the importance of being a part of an Ethiopian community at Yale, while others highlighted the importance of opening the event to the public.

"We are bringing together a wide range of people," Meron Tegegne '27, who also helped organize the event, said. "In the past, people have just been walking by, seen the vibe and the music and just joined. We're totally open to all of that."

YEESA has around 70 to 80 regular event attendees, Tegegne said. The group is affiliated with the Afro-American Cultural Center and is advised by Teferi Adem, a research anthropologist and member of the MacMillan Center's Council on African Studies.

Sosna Biniam '26 highlighted the importance of the community, describing her culture as "unique." She said it can feel isolating being one of few members of the Eastern Orthodox Church — a smaller religious community that celebrates holidays at different times from other Chrsitian denominations.

For Saron Tefera '26, YEESA provides a community different from her home in Cincinnati, Ohio. She said it meant a lot to her to see the YEESA community grow over the years.

"It's been really nice to see people that look like me with the same cultural background come to this university and share all of our cultural experiences together," Tefera said.

In February, YEESA will be hosting the EESA Feast, an annual conference for Ethiopian and Eritrean Students Associations from universities across the country. Mesfin said the conference will be a celebration "for the diaspora and by the diaspora," and invites will extend across the country.

"It's supposed to be a really powerful way to unite us, celebrate our culture, but also talk about the things that matter to us and make progress towards our future," Mesfin said.

This is the first time Yale will host the EESA conference.

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KAMALA GURUAJA / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Students gathered at Beinecke Plaza to celebrate the Ethiopian and Eritrean New Year with food and dance.