NEWS

"Autumn leaves falling down like pieces into place, and I can picture it after all these days"
ALL TOO WELL TAYLOR SWIFT

Katie Ledecky discusses career, women's sports at Battell talk

BY JOANNA CHANG
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



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Team USA swimmer Katie Ledecky discussed being the most decorated female in Olympic history, as well as how she achieves her goals and has navigated personal growth, during a Battell Chapel event on Wednesday evening.

American Olympian Katie Ledecky spoke to a crowd of around 350 people during a talk in Battell Chapel on Wednesday evening.

Ledecky addressed being a teenage professional athlete, navigating personal obstacles and the importance of women's sports. The discussion was supported by Timothy Dwight College's Chubb Fellowship, which invites inspiring leaders across skills and discipline.

"Usually, my big, scary goals are related to the Olympics, and those are ones that I'm always thinking about. And then to make them less scary, I set smaller, short-term goals for each year, sometimes even for each meet," Ledecky said. "Then all those things start adding up. So you start achieving some of those short-term goals and seeing progress, seeing progress in training too."

At one point, Ledecky presented a Paris Olympic Gold medal held in a special sock to the crowd, which drew an explosive applause from the audience.

Ledecky opened the conversation by talking about how she discovered a passion for swimming at age six and how her family supported her throughout her first Olympic games at age 15.

"I think my parents and my family did a great job of helping me maintain the perspective of 'Hey, you never expected to even make it to one Olympics. So anything from now on is just a cherry on top, icing on the cake,"' she said.

After attending the Olympics, Ledecky went on to attain a degree in psychology at Stanford, which she said helped her understand the medical side of the sport and assist her in mental management. She said she uses psychological techniques like self-talk to redirect focus when her body experiences pain during her races.

Ledecky also holds an honorary degree from Yale, which she received at last school year's commencement ceremony.

Ledecky discussed being compared to male athletes and the lack of recognition of females in sport. She said she is a part of a new age of female swimmers who are able to compete at older ages, adding that last year, at age 28, she broke a world record she set in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

"I always found it to be an honor to be compared to them," Ledecky said, referring to her male counterparts. "But I think sometimes there's a lack of appreciation for the history of great female athletes that we have had in the U.S., whether that's in swimming or other sports."

After the event, a group of around 90 students joined Ledecky for a question-and-answer dinner at Timothy Dwight College.

Madelyn Bass '30, who is a former high school soccer player, said Ledecky's philosophy of not believing in "athletic peaks" is relevant to her past athletic career.

Lucy Walker '27, who swims for the Yale women's swimming and diving program, said she appreciated Ledecky's view on family and friends being the motivators for her career.

"My family was never someone that pushed the sport on me. It was kind of my own love for the sport and the relationships that I had," Walker said. "And all my friends here at Yale. I live with swimmers, we'll study, we'll eat together. It's just a great community to have in the broader Yale community."

Ledecky encouraged younger athletes to maintain resilience and perseverance as they discover their strengths and weaknesses and learn to communicate to coaches when their aspirations of gold aren't immediately realized.

Looking forward to the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, Ledecky emphasized her excitement to continue swimming with Team USA and witnessing how her sport can bring people together.

"I have weaknesses — that's for sure — and there are always things I can get better at," she said.

Ledecky is the most decorated American Olympic female athlete.

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Loud, potentially polluting leaf blowers concern doctors, faculty

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Several Yale faculty members said they think the use of leaf blowers near the Yale hospital and around campus is hazardous to patients, workers and passersby.

In interviews with the News, five current and former doctors at the School of Medicine, as well as a Yale professor, raised concerns about the health impacts of gas-powered leaf blowers, though a University spokesperson did not specify whether or not Yale uses gas-powered or battery-powered tools.

Karen Jubanyik MED '94, an associate professor of emergency medicine, said that leaf blower usage outside the hospital was a "regular occurrence" and seemed "particularly concerning." She said that this summer, she saw at least three workers using gas-powered leaf blowers early in the morning.

"In addition to the noise at 6:30 in the morning, it seems that people with asthma and heart disease probably don't need to be exposed to additional fine particulate matter," she said in a phone interview.

Gas-powered leaf blowers can generate small particles that are linked to cardiovascular disease, Naftali Kaminski, a professor of internal medicine at the Yale School of Medicine, said in a phone interview. Pollutants from gas-powered leaf blowers can cause "extensive damage," including by inducing inflammation and killing epithelial cells, he said.

A spokesperson for Yale's Office of Facilities did not respond to multiple requests for comment, including inquiries about whether facilities workers used gas-powered or battery-powered leaf blowers.

A spokesperson for Yale New Haven Health did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the use of the tools.

Leaf blowers outside hospitals can disturb patients' sleep, Shirley McCarthy MED '79, a professor emerita of radiology and biomedical imaging, said in a phone interview. According to McCarthy, gas-powered leaf blowers can operate "well above" limits typically dictated by noise ordinances.

General surgery resident Jennifer Ku said that she had seen leaf blowers used outside the hospital before 5:30 a.m.

The early hour "just seems like such a strange time to do it," she said in a phone interview.

Jessica Feinleib, an assistant professor of anesthesiology, said she saw leaf blowers used outside the hospital "all the time," including at Yale New Haven Health and the West Haven Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Gas-powered leaf blowers can harm workers' health, she said.

Kaminski said that in general, he "rarely" sees workers operating leaf blowers wearing masks.

"As a physician, it makes me really concerned that people get exposed to that kind of exhaust," Feinleib said in a phone interview.

'You couldn't hear yourself think'

Alternatives to gas-powered leaf blowers include battery-powered electric tools. According to Vincent Giordano, a retired environmental attorney and advocate for leaf blower restrictions in Connecticut, battery-powered leaf blowers tend to be significantly quieter than gas-powered leaf blowers, pollute less and are safer for workers.

A 2022 Yale Sustainability article said that Yale's Central Downtown Campus had "nearly completed" its switch to all-electric machinery. However, Benjamin Foster GRD '74 '75, a professor of assyriology, says the noise from leafblowers still reaches his sixth-floor office in the Humanities Quadrangle.

Last spring, two workers blew leaf blowers for four hours in HQ, Foster said. He recalled having to move his class from his sixth-floor office to another room because the noise was "deafening" and "you couldn't hear yourself think."

"These things were way over the limit, which is recognized as the line above which the decibels will damage your hearing," Foster said. "It's like going to a rock concert or something like that and not wearing earplugs."

In April, Foster raised his concerns about the spring incident to Yale's Head of Public Safety Duane Lovello, who forwarded his message to Yale Environmental Health and Safety, according to emails that Foster shared with the News.

Kevin Charbonneau, executive director of Yale Environmental Health and Safety, wrote to Foster in May, "I have a monthly meeting with Facilities leadership tomorrow, and I have added the issues you raised to the agenda for discussion."

On Oct. 1, Foster emailed Charbonneau and asked him about the outcome of the meeting. In the email, he also told Charbonneau that "yesterday we were treated to the deafening noise of at least two good-sized leaf blowers simultaneously in the HQ quadrangle." Foster said that he did not hear back.

Foster wrote in a Wednesday email that he saw two workers using gas-powered leaf blowers that morning near Yale Law School. The noise "could be heard two blocks away," he wrote.

A spokesperson for Environmental Health and Safety did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Connecticut municipalities of Westport, Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk and New Canaan have imposed restrictions on gas-powered leaf blowers, according to their government websites.

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ABBY ASSOUAD / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

Several Yale doctors and a University professor told the News that they were concerned about Yale's longtime use of leaf blowers. They said noise and pollution from the machines could be hazardous to health.