

PROTEST

For some student activists, 2015 was life-altering

A decade after calls for racial inclusivity resounded on campus, former students who participated in the post-Halloween swell of activism say the experience changed the trajectories of their careers and lives.

BY OLIVIA CYRUS
STAFF REPORTER

In a Facebook post published on Halloween in 2015, Neema Githere, then a Yale sophomore, sounded the alarm about a fraternity's alleged "white girls only" party, helping to ignite a tornado of controversy.

"I'd just like to take a moment to give a shoutout to the member of Yale's SAE chapter who turned away a group of girls from their party last night, explaining that admittance was on a 'White Girls Only' basis," Githere wrote in the post, referring to Sigma Alpha Epsilon. "And a belated shoutout to the SAE member who turned me and my friends away for the same reason last year. God Bless the USA."

The Facebook post, which has since garnered more than 1,500 likes and 250 shares, went viral — drawing attention from major publications across the country, such as *The Washington Post* and *TIME*. It also ignited at least two distinct protests and several meetings with administrators over race and belonging that would help reshape Yale's campus, Githere said.

More than 1,000 students participated in the demonstrations in November 2015, which were also fueled by an email from Silliman College Associate Master Erika Christakis criticizing administrators' guidance to students about exercising "sensitivity" when selecting Halloween costumes. The controversy coincided with Githere's allegations of racist behavior at Yale's Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter, which has since broken from the national organization and is known today as LEO.

For Githere, the aftermath was life-altering. After enduring cyberbullying and what she described as "cyber-PTSD," she dropped out of Yale and said she was denied readmission twice.

When asked about Githere's attempt to be readmitted, University spokesperson Karen Peart wrote that "to maintain confidentiality and student privacy,

for a generation of Yale students who were forced to confront the limits of belonging and advocacy at an elite institution. A decade later, three other former students who participated in that activism reflected on how their involvement changed the trajectory of their careers and lives.

In 2015, Luke Stringer '18 DIV '23 stood alongside the a cappella group, Shades of Yale, and in front of a sea of more than a thousand students on Cross Campus and sang a medley of "Amen" and "We Shall Overcome."

At the time, Stringer was an architecture major. Now, he's an associate pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church in Des Moines, Iowa. In a recent phone interview, Stringer said his experience with the protests catalyzed a turning point in his post-graduation aspirations.

"It sort of boiled over into this moment of, 'Why does this university seem to be so ill-equipped to address the needs of Black students and students of color to feel at home and full members of University life?'" Stringer said.

Stringer, who is white, said he felt that the protests were fueled by the same wave of outrage that came with protests in Ferguson, Mo., a year earlier. In August 2014, a white police officer shot a Black teenager in the St. Louis suburb, setting off weeks of protests across the country.

Many students of varied backgrounds were pondering: "Do Black lives matter, and if so, how do we make that true?" Stringer said.

Among those students was Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes DIV '18, then a first-year Yale Divinity School student, who was adjusting to her transition from serving as a young adult pastor in New York. A graduate of Hampton University, a historically Black university in Virginia, she worked part-time at the Afro-American Cultural Center, affectionately known as "the House," and was intrigued by the prospect of mentoring Black students at a predominantly white institution like Yale.



Illustration by Serina Yan

“WHY DOES THIS UNIVERSITY SEEM TO BE SO ILL-EQUIPPED TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF BLACK STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR TO FEEL AT HOME AND FULL MEMBERS OF UNIVERSITY LIFE?”

we do not discuss specific reinstatement cases.”

"The protests from my Facebook post was one of many dominoes that led to a residential college being renamed & a number of other concessional transformations but in many ways I feel like a casualty to that whole saga," Githere, who is now an author, wrote in an email the News, referring to the renaming of Calhoun College — named for pro-slavery politician John Calhoun, who graduated from Yale College in 1804 — to Grace Hopper College.

"In as much as it inspired the core of my practice it also indirectly led to me withdrawing from Yale & never getting a bachelor's degree," Githere added.

The protests were a turning point, not just for Githere, but

"Once the residential college environment was no longer safe for Black students, they admitted they had no place to retreat and that's what got me involved in the protest," Cudjoe Wilkes said in a recent voice memo sent to the News. "I just could not fathom already being a minority student at an Ivy League school and then the place where you're supposed to call home is also a place where you don't feel supported or seen."

In response to students' concerns that the residential colleges were not inclusive for students of color, Jonathan Holloway, the Yale College dean at the time, sent an email to undergraduates addressing the concerns, as reported by *The Washington Post*.

"Remember that Yale belongs

to all of you, and you all deserve the right to enjoy the good of this place, without worry, without threats, and without intimidation," Holloway wrote at the time.

That week, Cudjoe Wilkes joined about 1,000 people in a march from the Afro-American Cultural Center to Cross Campus. She said at the time that she participated in the event because, even as a graduate student, she still felt an undeniable "emotional connection to the march because she is a woman of color," the News reported in 2015.

Stringer recalled that at the time, discourse around racial tensions was "all anyone was thinking and talking about." He said when organizers were coordinating the timing of the march, they began asking students if they would be willing to skip their normal class periods to attend. The response felt like a unanimous yes to Stringer, which he said was "outstanding."

university who claims to be the best in the world."

She recalled the national attention the protests garnered, with reporters from MSNBC, CNN and Fox News sprinkled across campus. Regardless, Cudjoe Wilkes said that she and other Black students made a pact not to comment to the outlets. Instead, they designated spokespeople to engage with the platforms, she said.

Though she and Stringer felt as though, initially, Yale intended to remain neutral or take the side of the Christakis in the name of free speech, Cudjoe Wilkes gave credit to former President Peter Salovey for his visibility throughout the protests' tenure.

At the Nov. 9, 2015 March of Resilience, among the nearly 1000 students, Salovey spoke with students and news outlets in attendance.

"We need to work harder, and this [march] is reinforcement that if we work harder, I think we can create an educational environment where everyone is respected, everyone is heard," Salovey told the News at the time. "I'm inspired to create that kind of Yale."

Cudjoe Wilkes said the events remain a constant reminder that "sitting on the sidelines" was and is not an option during conflict. They also reaffirmed for her that one cannot pick and choose when to become an advocate.

"I came to get a master's degree and to advance my education. I didn't come to be an activist," Cudjoe Wilkes said. "But I came to Yale at a time where activism was nonnegotiable and people think that activism is enjoyable and fun. It's not, it's labor, it's exhausting and the rest of your commitments don't stop because you're advocating for what's right."

For Abigail Goodman-Johnson '15, who graduated in December 2015, activism took another form. Enrolled in the course "Freedom and Identity in Black Cultures" with Professor Jafari Allen, Goodman-Johnson said in a recent phone interview that she learned about how art and protest could intertwine.

In the class, she said students wove together Black art and history with current events at the time. She recalled many of her classmates expressing themselves less through protesting and more through the creation of art. Goodman-Johnson herself contributed to the discourse by writing poetry about the events, posting them on social media and having conversations with peers expressing their nuanced thoughts via art and literature.

Nearly a decade after her Facebook post, Githere is still grappling with what that moment set in motion. In response to the post's virality, Githere said she began "naively" accepting interviews from a flood of journalists

and outlets.

Githere said that after attending a study abroad program in South Africa in spring 2016 to "get a bit of distance from Yale," she was hospitalized the following fall and medically withdrew from Yale.

Intending to return to Yale, she said that she completed all the requirements for reinstatement — therapy and two summer classes — yet, her application was denied, as was her appeal.

The rejection, Githere said, left a lasting wound from the emotional toll of being shut out from her own education.

She attributed discovering the works of artist and author Audre Lorde as a turning point in her healing journey, especially "The Audre Lorde Questionnaire to Oneself," which asks: "What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?"

"Hits me in the gut every day," Githere wrote. "I feel like Audre Lorde would probably come at me for framing myself as a 'casualty' so much and not celebrating that 'transforming silence into courage' is what it's always been about because courage is a gift regardless of what necessitates it."

Last week, Goodman-Johnson, who is based in D.C., said she met up with a former classmate who graduated in 2016 and reflected on how her current profession, working in education policy, was inspired by the protests in late 2015.

"My experience with the demonstrations and my experiences volunteering with education organizations in New Haven informed my desire to have a career dedicated to service," Goodman-Johnson said. "The demonstrations also underscored the importance of being in conversation with folks and ensuring that there are some spaces, including when there's dissent, for folks to share what they are experiencing."

Stringer said he returned to New Haven in 2024 when encampments were set up on campus by pro-Palestinian protesters. He said that seeing student demonstrations a year ago showed him that the culture of protesting at Yale is alive and well.

"Students are totally with it," Stringer said. "They are paying attention to the same problems of who is being treated as collateral and not thought of as full human beings, full participants of whose lives are not mattering to this institution."

In the fall of 2015, Yale College had an undergraduate population of 5,505 students, according to a fact sheet assembled by the Office of Institutional Research.

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