

Alumni

1st Generation Yale Conference to highlight alumni and faculty trailblazers

Alumni and faculty from a variety of backgrounds will be sharing their experiences at the event, to be held April 13-15 at the Yale School of Management.

Apr 9, 2018

6 min read

By **Brita Belli**

As a Yale freshman, Peggy Kuo ('85 B.A.) remembers being struck by the financial comfort of many of her peers — how easily they had transitioned to this collegiate world via the prep school track. “Yale was a big departure from the world I had come from,” she says. “We were immigrants from Taiwan and firmly middle class. My father was a civil servant — an engineer for the city of New York. Money was something you earned.”



Peggy Kuo ('85 B.A.) was motivated to excel at Yale and is now a magistrate judge for the Eastern District of New York. She'll talk about "Being the First, But Not the Last," at the First Generation Yale Conference. (Photo credit: Lise Chapman)

The idea that her classmates would take vacations in Europe or head to a second home in Manhattan for the weekend seemed extraordinary to Kuo. Most surprising, she says, were students who treated Yale as a given. "For me, it was a huge privilege," Kuo says, "I was determined to make the most out of it and take extra classes. In my senior year, I started auditing classes. It was all about learning and making connections."

Kuo, who followed her Yale education with a degree from Harvard Law School, is now a magistrate judge for the Eastern District of New York, the first Taiwanese-American to hold that position. She's one of several leading alumni and faculty who will be sharing their experiences at the [1st Generation Yale Conference](#) April 13-15 at Yale School of Management. In her keynote talk, Kuo will address "What we as recipients of such a great opportunity can do to make use of that — whether through direct mentoring or working behind the scenes."

David Thomas ('78 B.A., '84 M.A., '86 Ph.D.) says that while he was actively involved in the [Black Student Alliance](#) as a Yale undergrad and served as a university recruiter in his home city of Kansas City, Missouri, "I didn't feel a connection to the institution." When

his white freshman-year roommates chose housing for the following year without including him, he was hurt. Looking back, he wonders if it was race, or his first-generation status, that played the larger role. “I didn’t understand the concept of dropping a course until I was reading an article in the Yale newspaper,” he says. “Other black students from upper- and middle-class families knew things I didn’t. Being first generation mattered, but in ways that were invisible.”

In the second semester of his senior year, Thomas met Leroy Wells Jr., an African American student who was pursuing his doctorate at Yale in organizational behavior, who would change the course of Thomas’ life. Wells offered Thomas a role doing research for him that summer, and encouraged Thomas to follow a similar path. “He’s responsible for me coming back to Yale to do my Ph.D.,” says Thomas. “He’s the greatest gift Yale gave me in terms of a mentor.”



David Thomas ('78 B.A., '84 M.A., '86 Ph.D.) will speak about his journey, from navigating Yale as a first-generation black student to becoming president of Morehouse College, at the 1st Generation Yale Conference. (Photo credit: Lise Chapman)

In grad school, Thomas found the connection at Yale that he had missed earlier. It was there, he says, “that I learned what’s possible in terms of having a great experience at a

great educational institution.” His life journey would take him from assistant professor at the Wharton School, to assistant professor at Harvard, to dean of Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business, to the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Professor of Business Administration at Harvard, to his current role — president of Morehouse College.

Thomas says a lot has changed in the way universities acknowledge the importance of inclusivity. “Just the fact that we’re recognizing that being a first-generation college student can impact your experience gives people a license to admit what they don’t know and ask for help,” Thomas says.

Luis Miguel Anez, associate professor of psychiatry at Yale, says he experienced “imposter syndrome” for years, adding that the debilitating feeling that one does not deserve their accomplishments is common, particularly for women and minorities climbing educational and career ladders without role models. “It’s very prevalent,” Anez says. “But people don’t speak about it which makes the impact stronger.” He’ll be addressing imposter syndrome at the conference. Raised in Venezuela until he was 18, Anez says he was a confident student among his peers in Florida. But something changed when he joined the Yale faculty in 1996. “There were no mentors that looked like or spoke like I did,” he says. “If I went to a conference for faculty, I was the only Latino there.” As a result, says Anez, he kept quiet. “I didn’t want to call attention to myself — people would see that I don’t belong.”

Anez has now been at Yale for more than two decades and is the director of [Hispanic Services at the Connecticut Mental Health Center](#). He serves as a mentor to Latino pre-doctoral and post-doctoral students in the psychiatry department and supports efforts to actively recruit students of diverse backgrounds. “Now we have a critical mass,” he says. Having mentors is a crucial step to overcoming a feeling of inadequacy, Anez says. “To speak, you have to feel safe. And to feel safe, you have to have a mentor that says, ‘I will protect you.’”

Lise Chapman (’81 M.B.A.), the conference organizer, calls the 1st Generation Yale Conference “our coming-out party.” She says: “I want everyone at Yale to feel that they belong. We need to respect and celebrate our differences.” While Chapman was not a first-generation student herself, she felt called to bring diverse alumni together to reconnect with Yale, to support students navigating two worlds, and to connect these

promising students with career opportunities. To that end, the conference includes keynote address by Marta Moret '84 M.P.H.; a career event with sponsors including Macquarie, AQR Capital Management, Honest Tea and Unilever; and a student-led panel and networking reception.

“My dream,” says Chapman, “is to one day have first-generation alumni groups in all major cities.”

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