

# First-gen alumni gather at Yale

ANASTASIIA POSNOVA 12:25 AM, APR 16, 2018

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Yale held its inaugural “Blazing the Trail: Being the First” conference over the weekend to explore the challenges faced by alumni from underserved and underrepresented backgrounds.

The conference was organized by Lise Chapman SOM ’81 and Magda Vergara ’82 — co-chairs of 1stGenYale, a shared interest group at the Association of Yale Alumni founded in spring 2016 to connect students and alumni who were among the first in their families to attend college or graduate school. More than 240 alumni and students from across the country came to the conference, according to Chapman, who said the group also covered travel costs for 16 alumni who could not afford to attend the event. The conference was supported by nine corporate and nonprofit sponsors and 19 University offices, departments and AYA groups.

“It’s like a reunion without a class,” Chapman said. “I’m blown away by the reaction and support and love people have for each other.”

The conference featured three keynote speakers, all of whom were first-generation college students — Marta Moret SPH ’84, the president of Urban Policy Strategies, a New Haven–based consulting

firm that conducts research and assessment in public health; Peggy Kuo '85, a magistrate judge in the Eastern District of New York; and David Thomas '78 GRD '86, the president of Morehouse College.

During lunch, the participants enjoyed a surprise performance by the a cappella group Shades of Yale and also got an opportunity to discuss their concerns with University President Peter Salovey before the evening reception.

“[The conference] is a great way to welcome our alumni back, and we want everyone who has been a part of Yale at some point in their lives to feel like this is their Yale,” Salovey said. “My very first freshman assembly welcoming address as president was about Yale and the American dream, so I look forward to reaffirming our University’s commitment to making that dream possible.”

During the conference, participants attended discussions led by Yale faculty members on overcoming the difficulties faced by first-generation students and alumni, such as “impostor syndrome” and the challenges of navigating two different worlds, at home and at Yale. Attendees networked with alumni from various sectors and listened to a panel of current students talk about what Yale is like today.

During the panel discussions, alumni opened up about the challenges they faced at Yale and after graduation, sharing stories of their experiences. According to Chapman, many participants said they had not visited Yale for several years and felt disconnected from the University, but that the thought of attending an event about the

challenges of being first-generation students and alumni made them feel excited to return.

“These people are opening up their lives and their stories in very deep ways that they haven’t felt safe to express out loud, and people are saying things like ‘I’ve never said this to anybody, but I want to share this here,’ and people are telling their own stories from their own experiences,” Chapman said. “It’s remarkable. I’m blessed and grateful for these alumni and that we were able to create something like this as a pilot, and we’re going to build from this.”

Alumni attendees interviewed by the News praised the event and said they hoped Yale will continue to hold such conferences in the future.

Alden Johnson ’85 said he decided to participate in the conference because he has long believed there are “so many issues and so many things” older generations of Yalies could share with younger alumni.

He added that the day’s events were “empowering,” and gave participants the chance to hear personal stories from many alumni, network with a variety of people and think about the impact they might have in the future.

Cynthia Campos ’16 said she wished similar conferences took place when she was a student, as it would have been “wonderful ... to feel the support and the welcoming nature of alums” who have successfully navigated Yale as first-generation students.

“Being able to now see the wonderful careers that many of these alums have been able to go on to has been really refreshing and encouraging,” she said. “I hope this movement will grow and we’ll be able to have this reunion on a more frequent basis.”

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***Correction, April 17:*** A previous version of the article incorrectly stated that Magda Vergara received a graduate degree from Yale. She is, in fact, an alumna of Yale College.

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