



WHAT MAKES  
YALE HOME FOR  
ITS STUDENTS

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*WELCOME  
HOME*

home when we are away from it. Crucially, how can we reconcile the university as home when it is Yale's emphasis on safety that forced us to abandon it?

The experience of leaving Yale has undoubtedly been one of loss. Regardless of class, age or college, the departure from campus was a momentous disruption in the Yale experience, intensified by the fact that many were informed of the end of the school year as they knew it while away from campus on spring break, and were unable to return. The university is still in the process of reuniting its students with their belongings, left in their dorm rooms on the assumption of a return in late March. However, the Yale community has endured. Through Zoom meetings and other virtual channels, the spring semester was concluded at its original timing, albeit entirely online and with an emergency grading scale: universal pass-fail. For many, this continuity signifies both the strength of the community and the defining factors in what makes Yale home.

**FOR NINE MONTHS OF THE YEAR, YALE** University's campus is the centre of its undergraduates' universe. Even though it is at times excruciatingly hot, and at others bitterly cold, its setting at the heart of New Haven has undeniable charm. Each August, the university's faculty, staff, lecture halls, and colleges welcome its students with open arms. The slogan "Welcome Home" is everywhere, often

"I've come to realize that Yale is its people," asserted Enzo Okpoye, a rising junior in Benjamin Franklin College. Okpoye remained on campus during the spring semester due to travel restric-

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directed at the newest first-year intake, but also applied more broadly to celebrate the return of the upperclassmen to campus. The university promises a home away from home, a haven nestled in the aptly named Connecticut city of New Haven. It is a place of comfort, of academic and personal excellence, and most importantly of safety. This spring, however, the university was not our home. The scattering of the student body across the world was inevitable as the coronavirus pandemic escalated in the United States. The actions of the university were focused on the wellbeing of the entire Yale community—in these extreme circumstances, the way to save the community was to dissolve it. As a result, we are left with the question of how we can redefine Yale as a

tions that prevented him from returning to Nigeria, and had a unique experience of campus with its students absent. "With everyone gone, campus was just another empty bunch of buildings and streets—it really didn't feel like home. In a way, I guess when they say 'welcome home,' the slogan doesn't refer to the campus itself. Instead, it refers to the people and culture that come together to make Yale a "home" for everyone."

Okpoye is not alone in this sentiment. Rising sophomore Veronica Wall described the experience of her first year ending far earlier than expected, commenting on the effects of this disruption on her sport. Wall is a member of the women's crew

team, whose season never truly started due to the pandemic. Hailing from Ashburton, New Zealand, the experience of being forced to leave campus was especially poignant given that she was so far from home. At the same time, she explains that this is also what has made her shortened Yale experience so special. For Wall, what makes Yale home is undeniably the people.

“Being on a team has made me feel like I’m part of a family away from home. Especially being

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so far away from what I am familiar with, being amongst a group of such driven and compassionate people has made me feel so included and part of Yale. Leaving part way through my first year was definitely a hard experience as it is hard to come to terms with the memories that I am missing out on. I think that these adversities that we are facing will ultimately bring us together even stronger next year, and these things are a part of life. Being able to handle the unexpected is what will make us more resilient in the long run, no matter how much it may hurt in the present.”

In truth, what makes Yale home for most of its community is likely a combination of the people and the place. Virtual classes and Zoom meetings have somewhat filled the void left by the dispersion of the student body, but I am sure that most students would agree that this virtual experience does not do our experience of Yale people, while at Yale, justice. Originally from Boston, MA, Elizabeth Duserick was in the graduating class of 2020, and her final remote experience of Yale reflects the idea that home is both the place and the community. “For some, home may be not identified with a place but with a group of people,” she

explained. “And that’s what Yale has emphasized in the months where we were spread apart but still operating under the guise of the Yale community. That it is ultimately not the place but the people who define the school, and that is why its mission would not be lost over Zoom so long as its people were still logging on. Yale graduates often say the same thing. When they graduate, they talk about missing a certain section of the library, a class, a New Haven restaurant, but they always say what they’ll miss most is the people. That’s also exact-

ly what the tour guides say to you when they first take prospective students around Yale’s campus for the first time. They introduce you to its impressive buildings but say that what defines the Yale spirit is the people inside of them.”

Duserick captures this well in her own definition of home. “Home, then, is an intersection of place and people. If it’s the people that make the place, then do you even need the place? Yes—everyone recognizes that meeting your first-year classmates over Zoom in the fall would be insufficient. Even though we are always on the move, you still need the place to bring you to the people. Home is wherever you meaningfully find people that you bring forward with you into the rest of your life—but that person you find can be you.”

Arguably, an enduring aspect of life at Yale is its rhythm, and it is in many ways this rhythm that makes the Yale experience so comforting, so easy to buy into. After the shopping period at the beginning of each semester, students settle into a regular routine of classes, mealtimes, extracurriculars, and social activities. This rhythm persists through the semester, repeats in the next, and shapes much

of the student experience. For Charles Bailyn, Benjamin Franklin's Head of College and the A. Bartlett Giamatti Professor of Astronomy and Astrophysics, the disruption to this routine at the hands of the coronavirus is what has characterised the university's pandemic experience.

"Academic life has very powerful rhythms," Professor Bailyn explained. "There's a day once per year where suddenly all the first-year students appear. A couple of months later everything stops for a week for Thanksgiving. Then over the winter break it is as empty as it is now. In mid-January, everyone reappears. In the spring, sure as night follows day, we have spring break, then the last classes, then reading period and finals, then senior week, then Commencement, then reunions. Then the summer programs come and go, and we begin all over again."

For Professor Bailyn, this routine has defined university life since its establishment, and without it, the university is fragmented. "So it has

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been, year on year, since I first came to Yale four decades ago, and with gradual modifications for over three centuries since the place was founded.

This year, for the first time in living memory, the pattern was broken. And broken severely—the seniors saw their Yale experience ended with seventy-two hours' notice while most of them were out of town, and we are all now scattered to the four corners of the Earth."

Perhaps what makes this experience so unnerving, then, is that it is still unclear what the campus experience in the fall will look like—and wheth-

er the rhythm of past years will return at all. Until the university made its official announcement in early July, it was not clear if the student body would be able to return to campus at all, and all the students could do was wait. For the staff, however, the experience was not so quiet. Interlocking planning committees and task forces were in a frenzy, preparing different contingency plans to cover any number of situations that might arise. The July 1 announcement itself did not relieve much of the uncertainty, given that the already limited on-campus residence could be disrupted at any time if the pandemic worsens. The leaders of the university cannot predict how the virus will shape the fall semester, or the likelihood of another peak. On this uncertainty, Professor Bailyn made two things clear:

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all across the globe come together to share their knowledge and experiences, and travel together down life's road for a while, will continue. Whether it is in the form of those Zoom squares that have come to dominate our visual imaginations, or whether we will see each other in the flesh across the courtyard, one way or another we will still cross-pollinate the experiences of a wonderfully diverse population. The evolutionary biologists tell us that hybrid breeds are often more robust than any of the strains they arise from. That's the basis of what we do here in the university (indeed, that's why we call it a 'universe-ity'), and what we will continue to do in the future."