



Umoja Turns 50

BU's black student union promotes unity

ON A TUESDAY NIGHT IN February, more than a dozen students sat in a circle in a College of Arts & Sciences classroom. They were there for a panel discussion titled *What I Wish I Knew as a Freshman*, hosted by Umoja, Boston University's black student union.

The student panelists, Jordan Carter (CFA'17), Kirby Page (CAS'18), Daniel Wiley (ENG'17), and Sherifat Bakare (CAS'16, SPH'18), were leading a conversation about the culture shock that black students often experience when they arrive at BU as freshmen. The discussion was part of the club's Unity Week, a series of events commemorating Umoja's 50th anniversary.

The panelists stressed the importance of building rapport with

Jonea Weekley (Questrom'17), president of Umoja, looks on as Kenneth Elmore (SED'87) (second from right), associate provost and dean of students, speaks at the Algonquin Club reception hosted by Umoja February 24.

professors inside and outside of class, meeting new people, and getting involved. Bakare shared her struggle to fit in. "I just didn't feel comfortable," she recalled of her first months at BU. "I hadn't found my group of people." But when she began working at the Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, she found a home base.

Many of the students at the discussion said that Umoja itself had been instrumental in helping them find community at BU. The organization was founded in 1967, at a time when African Americans across the country were mobilizing around civil rights. In its early years, members fought against racial injustice on campus and beyond. They protested the University's lack of

African American faculty in 1969 and created a legal defense fund the next year in support of activist Angela Davis, prosecuted for conspiracy involving the armed takeover of a Marin County, Calif., courtroom that left four people dead, and later acquitted in a federal trial.

Today, the club's mission is to support and represent black students both within and outside the University, as well as to educate the BU community about the black experience and promote unity through its forums and other events during the year.

"Umoja's goal is to strive to create a healthy environment for black students and all students interested in black culture," says club president Jonea Weekley (Questrom'17). "We do this

through a variety of events, such as general meetings, where we discuss current topics, or more formal events that are meant to celebrate the community.”

The club, with 30 or so active members currently (its events often draw crowds of 100 or more), meets twice a month, and general membership is open to all BU students. Discussions focus on issues from pop culture to education and politics. Recent topics have included the dynamics of interracial relationships and the relevance and role of black music artists in society.

One of the club's biggest events was a September panel discussion cohosted with BU Students for Justice in Palestine about the connections between the Black Lives Matter movement and the Palestinian Liberation Movement. Featuring writer and civil rights activist Shaun King, the program drew more than 300 people.

“Umoja” is the Swahili word for “unity,” so it seemed appropriate to kick off the celebration of the club's 50th anniversary with a week of events in February, dubbed Unity Week, focused on fostering unity among students of color at BU.

“As the black student union on campus, it was important to us that we showcased not only black history around our country,” Weekley says, “but also black history happening every day on our campus.”

For many club members, the anniversary has been a time for taking stock. “At the end of the day, I've had the opportunity to build on a 50-year-long legacy, and while it may have been challenging at times, it was truly a privilege to be a part of this dynamic community,” says Weekley. “I hope to see Umoja continue to expand and provide programming that is meant to bring people together to smile, debate, discuss, and celebrate each other.” **KYLER SUMTER (COM'19)**

ON THE JOB

Biology Museum Curator

DALE PASINO

At Metcalf Science Center, efforts to bring an 1800s biology collection to life

Tucked away in an obscure corner of the Metcalf Science Center is a quiet room where old cabinets smelling faintly of mothballs line narrow aisles. The cabinets are filled with thousands of bird, mammal, insect, and plant specimens collected in the 1800s. Stuffed raptors stand in an open box on a countertop, the hawks and owls seeming to glare at visitors.



Anatomy lab coordinator Dale Pasino has been working tirelessly at the Metcalf Science Center to organize what is unofficially known as the Biology Natural History Museum.

Welcome to what is unofficially known as BU's Biology Natural History Museum.

Dale Pasino, the anatomy lab coordinator in the College of Arts & Sciences biology department and the museum's de facto curator, opens a cabinet and slides out a drawer with dozens of cicadas, each pinned in rows and labeled in a meticulous hand. “An insect that was alive during the Civil War—that's pretty neat,” he says.

In fact, most of the specimens in the room were gathered in the 19th century by amateur scientists, members of the Boston Society of Natural History, a forerunner of today's Museum of Science, Boston. By the early- to mid-20th century, financial problems and the museum's new emphasis on public education led members to donate much of their early collection to

Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology, and the rest to BU. The collection has been preserved and maintained over the years and is in remarkably good shape, considering that the room has no specialized climate control or dedicated staff.

Pasino says it's impossible to know exactly how many specimens the museum holds because there is no complete inventory, and many records are missing.

For years, the museum remained largely forgotten. Now Pasino and Kathryn Spiliotis, director of instructional labs and a CAS senior lecturer of biology, have begun to oversee efforts to preserve the collection and make it more widely accessible to members of the BU community. (It is currently open by appointment.)

Students have been hired to help care for the specimens. The long-term goal is to create a thorough, searchable database of the collection. Headway has already been made in cataloguing and labeling the collection's bees, wasps, and ants. One student is organizing the museum's collection of bats. And efforts are under way to label all the New England plants in the collection for researchers at Yale, who have a grant to produce a digital collection of the region's flora. **JB**