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Students honor Black Civil War veterans

By Valentina Toro
Contributor

The names of Black Civil War soldiers emerged from weathered stone on Nov. 20, as volunteers cleaned headstones at Westville Cemetery, revealing history that had long been fading from public memory.

The event, hosted by the Veterans' Office and Department of History, brought students and community members together for a hands-on preservation effort focused on the 29th anniversary of Connecticut Colored Infantry Regiment and other Black Civil War veterans.

"I'm really thankful that Jason included us. I think it's great that we have this much history in New Haven," Britt Conroy, the university's coordinator of Veteran, Military and Adult Learner Services, said. "Maybe nobody has been here to visit them in a hundred years, and that's a pretty big deal."

For many volunteers, the work was both a lesson in history and a reminder of the long-lasting costs of war.

Professor Jason Smith, who works within the history department, said the project exposes students to the human impact behind military service.

"I hope that it gives people a sense of the cost of war and the tolls of war," Smith said. "This is a concrete way for people to engage, remember and do something productive that



Professor Jason Smith of the history department standing with students and volunteers in the Westville Cemetery on Nov. 20.

makes people feel good." Cleaning the headstones also helped students connect New Haven's present-day community with its past.

Participants worked in small groups to scrub away moss and dirt, gradually restoring the bright white surfaces of headstones belonging to soldiers who served more than 150 years ago.

Business administration major Francisco Cortes, a freshman who was volunteering at the event, said the experience changed the way he views local history.

"I think this is a really important way of showing how much I appreciate the

New Haven community, along with all the people who sacrificed their lives for this country," Cortes said.

Smith said the project also encourages students to ask deeper questions about the individuals buried in the cemetery.

"It gets people to ask questions about who these people were," Smith said. "It reminds us that society owes veterans something, whether from Iraq and Afghanistan or the Civil War."

The restoration work revealed just how fragile historical memory can be. Several stones had become so discolored that names and dates were nearly

unreadable before volunteers began cleaning.

For Conroy, the transformation underscored the significance of the effort.

"You can see some of the stones are super discolored, and the ones we've cleaned off are brilliant white," Conroy said. "You couldn't even read some of these names before."

As volunteers finished their work, some students said the project encouraged them to reflect on what it means to serve a community.

Cortes said the lessons extended far beyond the cemetery.

"It doesn't have to be a grand gesture," Cortes said. "Taking a couple hours to make sure these gravestones are clean is a way to ensure they're not forgotten."

PHOTOS | LILY RAND



Professor Jason Smith of the history department and volunteers cleaning the headstones of Black Civil War veterans.

Faculty Town Hall examines academic freedom

By Brianna Wallen
News Editor

Faculty members gathered in the Adanti Student Center Theater on Nov. 21 for an Academic Freedom Town Hall, aimed at unpacking one of higher education's most essential principles.

The event invited attendees to step back, ask questions and take a closer look at what academic freedom truly means on today's campus.

"I hope that the discussions about our obligation to think about how we're presenting information to make sure that everyone who's in our audience feels supported and safe in the conversation is one that we all take forward in our work at all times," Interim President Sandra Bulmer said.

Hosted by the university's faculty senate, administration and faculty union, the town hall brought together representatives from the general counsel, the Interim Provost's Office and the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

The session honed in on the area that academic freedom protects and where the boundaries exist when navigating classroom discussions. Presidential Assistant George Morgan Jr. said the event was produced to help faculty understand these boundaries.

"The point was to discuss academic freedom and help our faculty understand where the line is in discussing their curriculum and when there might be political speech or there might be First Amendment violations outside of the university," Morgan said.

Morgan said that identifying these limits are crucial to creating a healthy academic environment that students can thrive and feel comfortable in.

"The whole purpose was to also understand how we can best promote civil discourse and critical thinking in the classroom to better support our students in their academic journey," Morgan said.

The discussion also highlights that faculty are not upholding these expectations alone, as the university recognizes these protections in their contracts.

"I want faculty to know that there are parameters meant to protect their academic freedom in their contract, and those parameters are recognized by the institution," Morgan said.

Morgan also revealed that the timing of this conversation reflects national changes and heightened scrutiny of universities from the government.

"The world is looking more closely at

institutions and looking at how we are teaching our students, what we are teaching our students but more specifically where we align ourselves," Morgan said.

With the university's commitment to being a social justice school, Morgan said it is important for content in the classroom and professors to each remain neutral.

"Being social justice doesn't mean that we are Democrat or Republican because we have to serve all students in all political groups, but what we might teach in the classroom could demonstrate that someone leans one way more than another," Morgan said.

Morgan explained that faculty should navigate these conversations carefully by ensuring that students feel supported regardless of their beliefs.

"It's very important that we stay balanced and support people who might have both perspectives," Morgan said.

By following this procedure, it can help to prevent dialogue from sparking discomfort or confusion when topics become intense or sensitive.

"At the same time, we also want them to understand that certain conversations could result in very strong reactions in our students. And when our students have



PHOTO | BRIANNA WALLEN

Presidential Assistant George Morgan Jr. and Interim President Sandra Bulmer in the Adanti Student Center Theater on Nov. 21.

those reactions, it is our responsibility to give them a space where they can decompress, reflect," Morgan said.

Though in order for this goal to be carried out, Bulmer said everyone on campus must take part.

"I think it's a community effort," Bulmer said. "Each of us are individuals when we show up here and each have a role to play."

Bulmer turned her

attention to faculty by emphasizing their presence at the front of the classroom is key to fostering academic freedom.

"Our faculty have a role of teaching their content and trying to present it in a way that engages our students at the same time that it's effective, and they need to think about their practice and how they can best accomplish that," Bulmer said.

Along with direction from faculty, Bulmer said creating a welcoming and supportive learning environment can cultivate a sense of belonging for students as well.

"I think when students come to class, their preparation and ability to engage when they're not comfortable and speak up and have conversations will help everyone to learn from one another," Bulmer said.