

MIT News

ON CAMPUS AND AROUND THE WORLD



Top row, left to right: John Dozier, L. Rafael Reif, Danielle Geathers, DiOnetta Jones Crayton, Madeleine Sutherland, Corban Swain. Middle row: Malick Ghachem, Sandy Alexandre, Ramona Allen, Chevy Cleaves, AudreyRose Wooden, Kelvin Green II. Bottom row: Kendyll Hicks, Aiyah Josiah-Faeduwor, Jaleesa Trapp, Heather Konar and family, ASL interpreter Darlene Washington.

Images: MIT News

In online vigil, MIT community shares grief, anger, and hope

“If you say you care about the injustice in this nation and in this world, you have a role to play,” said Associate Dean DiOnetta Jones Crayton.

Kathy Wren | MIT News Office
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“We are suffering from a multigenerational fracture,” rising junior and Undergraduate Association President Danielle Geathers said yesterday, referring to centuries of racism in America. “The bone was never set, and healing never occurred. Today we see the latest inflammation of that initial injury.”

Geathers spoke at an online MIT community vigil held in response to the killing of George Floyd and the loss of other Black lives due to racism and police brutality, and to the wave of protests across the country in recent days. Along with 16 others from across the Institute, she expressed her grief at recent events and urged viewers to work for racial justice in the world and at MIT.

“As a Black woman my heart is heavy,” Geathers said. “Not only because of the persistent racist attacks on Black lives, which are exacerbated by the disproportionate impact of Covid-19, but my heart is further burdened by the abject pain that accompanies the prevalent normalcy surrounding Black death and the vulnerability of Black lives. Tonight our MIT community gathers together to mourn the brutal deaths of George Floyd, Tony McDade,

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Ahmaud Aubrey, and Breonna Taylor, the most recent examples of murders with which we are all too familiar.”

Punctuated by poetry, literature, and song, the event featured students, faculty, staff, and MIT President L. Rafael Reif. It was hosted by the Institute Community and Equity Office.

“We come together now because we know, and we insist, that Black lives matter,” Reif said. “... And of course, we come together because we know that these truths, and the basic humanity of people of color, are violated in our nation every day.”

A heavy toll

Institute Community and Equity Officer John Dozier spoke from his home in Columbia, South Carolina, where he is working during the Covid-19 pandemic and where five generations of his family have been raised. He said growing up in this setting has given him an appreciation for the history of his home state and the southeastern U.S. He described several examples of brutal killings of Black people in the region across several decades, and contrasted them with the police’s treatment of white supremacist and mass murderer Dylann Roof when he was arrested.

“What has happened is not simply the results of a few bad people doing bad things,” Dozier said. “Rather it speaks to the systemic dehumanizing and undervaluing of Black lives, borne out of slavery, reinforced by Jim Crow law, and promoted even today by media stereotypes. I’m here as a Black man, son, husband, and a father, who is in deep pain from watching history repeat itself over and over again.”

Sandy Alexandre, associate professor of literature, also spoke of the collective harm to Black lives caused by racial injustice and violence: “Past and present have proven time and time again that racism is not merely a thorn in a person’s side, it’s also a suffocating knee on a person’s neck,” she said.

Vice President for Human Resources Ramona Allen, who grew up in segregated Boston and rode a school bus that was the target of stones, eggs, and bullets, noted, “These are collective, deep-seated traumas that are manifesting on our streets. It’s exhausting to be a person of color in this country, and quite frankly, we’re tired.”

However, Allen continued, “We convene today as members of a community of teaching, learning, and innovation. I draw strength from knowing that at MIT we continue to be committed to educating students in ways that will serve the nation and the world. ... My expectations for this community are extremely high. We have the best and the brightest minds here, so we need to lead the country from Cambridge the way we do in every other way that makes MIT a place of excellence.”

Calls to action

There are multiple ways to combat racism, said DiOnetta Jones Crayton, associate dean in the Office of the Vice Chancellor and director of the Office of Minority Education. As someone who has worked for change from within institutions, she recalled that she used to



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feel like she was the “not the right kind of activist” compared to those who led public protests.

However with experience, she said, she has come to understand that “We can all be warriors. We can all be drum majors for justice in our own spaces, in our own spheres of influence. We need those called to serve and change systems from within, and we also need those to called to shake the walls the ceilings the very foundations of oppressive policies and systems from without.”

She added: “Today we need everyone who says they care, not just to care but to do their part to fight the injustices that threaten to destroy us all, that threaten to destroy people who look like me. ... If you say you care about the injustice in this nation and in this world, you have a role to play.” Crayton, who is also an associate minister at a local Baptist church, concluded her remarks with a prayer and led participants in a moment of silence.

PhD student Jaleesa Trapp offered a call to action for those who do not experience anti-Black racism: “Are you actively looking for Black people to support that do this work all the time — Black educators, Black health care professionals, Black activists that are out on the street? What are you doing to educate yourself every day and not just when [a high-profile Black death] happens?”

Recent graduate Kendyll Hicks, an outgoing co-chair of the Black Students Union, urged the MIT administration to do more to protect its Black students. “To acknowledge and be informed without concrete effort is to be complicit and to support the police terror that’s occurring,” she said. “...We will never achieve an equitable and just community on campus if our humanity is disregarded everywhere else.”

Emphasizing that for Black people, “these moments often trigger things buried levels deep below the surface” that require great emotional labor to process, graduate student Aiyah Josiah-Faeduwor described growing up in communities that were underresourced and overpoliced, and over time watching as all of the male members of his household were arrested and imprisoned. He recalled pushing himself to excel academically and intellectually in order to remain as free and safe as possible. In making individual and collective commitment to racial justice, “Are we all ready to do our individual and collective parts?” he asked. “I’m more hopeful about this than I have ever been, but I am still worried. ... The decisions each of us make over the next few days may impact the fate of our world over the next generations. What will you do today?”

The program also included remarks from Madeleine Sutherland, a PhD student and president of the Graduate Student Council; Malick Ghachem, a history professor and criminal defense lawyer who works in the area of race and criminal justice; and Chevy Cleaves, the chief diversity and inclusion officer at Lincoln Laboratory.

Art and literature were also part of the program. Rising senior AudreyRose Wooden and PhD student Corban Swain read poems they had written. Rising senior Kelvin Green II read a passage from Toni Morrison’s “Beloved,” and Office of Graduate Education Communications Officer Heather Konar concluded the vigil with a performance of “Cry No More” by Rhiannon Giddens, which Konar sang accompanied by family members. The song ended with this

verse:

Our legacy is mighty
We can't carry this alone
You have to help us fight it
And together we'll be home

Topics: **Community** **Faculty** **Students** **Staff** **Diversity and inclusion**
Social justice **Administration** **President L. Rafael Reif**
Special events and guest speakers

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