

Wellesley



THE BASIS OF
OUR ETHOS

In 1965, six African-American students arrived at Wellesley with dreams of a Seven Sisters education, but soon woke up to the brutal reality of racism on campus. Sheltered from the turmoil over civil rights as young girls, the students quickly found themselves fighting for change at the College. Out of their activism came Ethos—which celebrated its 40th anniversary this spring—and a new vision for diversity on campus.

The Basis of

By Francie Latour



Images courtesy of Wellesley College Archives

'A propensity for forgetting our names has often been demonstrated. For those who have difficulty distinguishing us, we have a suggestion. Call us merely Black Women. For that is basically what we are, that is the basis upon which we operate as a group. That is the basis of our ethos.'

—Ethos letter to President Ruth Adams, 1969

Our Ethos

They were good little colored girls from St. Louis, growing up the way colored girls did in the early 1960s: on the black side of town. They understood what their skin color meant, and how much it mattered, even when it went unspoken. No one needed to explain why their fathers hid behind straw buyers or posed as workmen to move into the neighborhoods where the whites lived.

But Karen Williamson '69 and Francille Rusan Wilson '69 were also the daughters of a doctor, a journalist, and two social workers—raised in the same social circle, sent to solid schools,

*Changing the face
of Wellesley: The
black graduating
seniors of 1969*



Wellesley's "guest juniors," who came from historically black colleges for a year of study, pose for the cameras. The 1963 initiative by then-President Margaret Clapp garnered major media attention. At right, President Ruth Adams' internal files from 1967 show the College's plans to change to the freshman roommate-request card.

Type or print and return to the Director of Residence by **JUNE 1**

Last _____ First _____ Middle _____

Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Place of birth _____

Race _____ Native language _____
(If not English please explain on back.)

and state of schools attended during past three years: _____

Names _____
(Mr. and Mrs. use back of card to list name and address of each parent.)

Parents living? _____ Divorced? _____ Separated? _____

(position and company) of Father or Guardian _____

Occupation of Mother _____

Father _____ College of Mother _____

Brothers: _____ Ages _____ Number of sisters _____

Relatives (present students and alumnae) _____
(Please indicate relation)

Fill in the following only if you have *strong preferences* for:

Single room _____ Double room _____ A specific Residence Hall _____

A roommate whom you already know: (her name) _____

A roommate with the following interests, habits, background, race, religion (in _____)

and shielded from the racial upheaval that engulfed a nation. There would be no protesting in the streets, their parents had ordered. Just stay safe and get into college.

"I visited Wellesley, and I fell in love with it," Wilson says. "This was Massachusetts, the home of the abolitionists. I thought I was escaping segregation."

Instead, when the girls and four other African-American classmates arrived in 1965, they learned that Wellesley had its own unspoken rules, designed to keep them in a certain place—specifically, in separate dorm rooms, away from white students. Those rules, they were told, were there to make them feel more comfortable.

"The reality was, it wasn't about making us more comfortable, but keeping other people from being uncomfortable," says Williamson. "And you began to realize that racism was alive and well. And it was here."

Stunned, angry, and deeply disillusioned, a group of soft-spoken, middle-class students suddenly found themselves battling their College. It did not take long for Williamson, Wilson, and their peers to become the agitators their parents had feared.

For black women at Wellesley, the story is now legend: How, in December 1966, jammed in the back of a cab and crackling with energy after a black-student conference at Columbia University, five Wellesley women—Williamson, Wilson, Alvia Wardlaw '69, Yvonne Smith Madlock '70, and Ivy Thomas Riley '70—forged a permanent bond and pledged to confront racism on campus. Ethos, Wellesley's black-student organization, was born.

Less than two years later, in the shadow of the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Ethos found its voice

and a public stage, with a list of demands that would become Wellesley's blueprint for racial diversity. In just two years, Ethos brought the struggle for civil rights to Wellesley's doorstep, part of an unprecedented wave of black-student activism that transformed campuses across the country.

What happened in that taxi

didn't just set the stage for campus protests that followed, from the women's movement to divestment. What Ethos did was invent a vocabulary and a way of life at Wellesley that had never before existed. With no real mentors and no template to follow, they carved out a set of values that have since become the buzzwords of higher education: Diversity. Multiculturalism. Inclusion. And they did it with the smallest of numbers, fighting in the shadow of public and private universities where black students numbered in the dozens, and sometimes in the hundreds.

When Ethos' founders arrived on campus, the idea of a black-studies department was unheard of. Having a building where blacks could gather and organize seemed alien. The very notion that black students—or any students—could have a seat at the table, holding the administration accountable to the College's own ideals, seemed unimaginable.

By the time they graduated, Ethos' founders had either established these things or laid the groundwork for them. By the fall of 1968, Wellesley adopted black studies as an inter-departmental major. By 1969, Harambee House was a reality. By 1970, Wellesley's board of trustees appointed its first black member, and Academic Council, the faculty legislative body,



‘We were these nice little Southern girls, who had probably even brought white gloves with us. This was a period where, literally, you started off as a colored girl and ended up four years later a black woman.’

—Francille Rusan Wilson '69



Fran Rusan of Ethos Explains Black Power

voted to ensure black representation on its major decision-making committees. And by 1972, the College had its first black College Government president.

Ethos, with Williamson as its first president, fought those battles with doggedness and nerve. In four short years, its founders redefined diversity from the unwanted problem it had been to the fundamental goal it is for the College now. And they profoundly affected the Wellesley experience for every woman who would follow them.

As the founders celebrated Ethos' 40th anniversary on campus this spring, they say they could never have imagined the lasting impact Ethos would have on the College, or on them.

“We were these nice little Southern girls, who had probably even brought white gloves with us,” says Wilson, now an associate professor of African-American studies at the University of Maryland. “This was a period where, literally, you started off as a colored girl and ended up four years later a black woman.”

By some measures, Wellesley had long been at the forefront in educating black women. The College's first black alumna graduated in 1887, 10 years before the next Seven Sisters school had a black graduate. In the 1930s, when the last of the Seven Sisters allowed blacks to enter, Wellesley already had its first black-sibling alumnae. And in 1963, just two years before Ethos' founders arrived, then-President Margaret Clapp drew national media attention with a controversial program that brought

students from historically black colleges to campus to study.

To this day, Yvonne Madlock still feels indebted to the Wellesley alumna, a white high-school biology teacher, who first got her thinking that “a black girl from West Philly” could follow in her footsteps. “Wellesley historically had been a place that, in one way, had a certain respect for diversity,” she says. “But it was very much a one-way street, in that there was no recognition of the African-American experience. This was our opportunity to become like them, not for Wellesley to become more like us or learn from us. That kind of idea just didn't exist.”

Today, it seems difficult to imagine a time when Wellesley threw up barriers to diversity. But the women of Ethos remember that time vividly. It was a time when the clash between rebelling students and a tradition-bound administration nearly ripped the College apart at the seams. A time when, ironically, young African-American women who had lived by the rules of segregation all their lives felt the sting of racism for the first time.

Growing up in a black enclave

of Houston, Alvia Wardlaw knew a school like Wellesley would be in her future from the time she was 7. “I can remember exactly when it happened,” she says. “My mother was cleaning up the kitchen, and I was standing next to the freezer.” Sitting



Negroes Ask Changes At Wellesley

Negro students at Wellesley College yesterday threatened to begin a hunger strike this morning unless the administration accedes to demands for more aggressive recruitment of Negro students, staff and faculty.

During a student protest (above) in April 1968, Ethos members (left to right) Karyn Taylor '70, Francille Rusan Wilson '69, and Karen Williamson '69, led a workshop. After a threatened hunger strike, Ruth Adams agreed to Ethos' demands at a press conference (opposite page). Director of Special Programs Donald Polk (opposite, far right), hired in 1969 as the first black senior administrator, quickly became a mentor and father figure to black students.

Tower Court East
Wellesley College
Wellesley, Massachusetts
April 22, 1968

Miss Ruth Adams,
President
Wellesley College
Wellesley, Massachusetts

Dear Miss Adams:

As black students on this campus we feel that the immediate implementation of the following proposals is vital to insure the relevancy of a Wellesley education to contemporary American life.

1. Consistent with Wellesley's policy of geographical representation of students, ten per cent of the student body should be black.
2. The administration, faculty, and other employees of the college should also reflect the racial distribution of the larger community.
3. A departmental major in Afro-American studies should be established.
4. The presence on campus of a black psychiatrist is necessary.
5. A Martin Luther King, Jr. lecture fund should be established to bring black thought and culture to the Wellesley campus. This fund should be administered similarly to the Mayling Soong Foundation with a student representative from Ethos.
6. The Catherine Waddell Hughes Scholars program has proved of little benefit and this money should be used for scholarships for black students.

We are very concerned that Wellesley put these proposals into effect immediately and are willing to consult with you to discuss them and work with you towards implementing them.

Sincerely,

Ethos

on top of the freezer was an essay Wardlaw had written; a colleague of her parents who had read it had been impressed.

"He said, 'Alvia, this is so good. You are a good little writer, and you're going to grow up and go to Spelman,'" Wardlaw recalls. "And my mother said, 'No. Alvia isn't going to go to Spelman. She's going to go to one of those schools in the East, like Radcliffe or Smith.' And I had no idea what these were at the time. But she just stated it as fact, and I was like, 'OK, all right.'"

In Wardlaw's world, racism always lurked just below the surface. She still remembers the family trips to Atlanta to see relatives, trips her parents meticulously plotted to make sure they did not run out of gas unexpectedly in Alabama or Mississippi.

But it wasn't until she walked down Wellesley's main drag, Central Street, that she had the N-word hurled at her. "Because the communities kept themselves so separate, I never encountered this kind of racism in Houston," says Wardlaw, a curator and a leading expert in African-American art who still lives just blocks from where she was raised. "I remember thinking, 'Isn't that something? Here we are, in the liberal lap.'"

To many of their white peers, they were novelties, black girls who could stand toe to toe with them in the classroom or at afternoon tea. Few Wellesley students had ever seen such women—a fact Wilson quickly learned after white classmates

began approaching her to ask if she knew their maids. "Or they would say, 'Why are the palms of your hands white?'" Wilson remembers. "And you would think, where am I?"

If white students saw them

as exotic, the administration of President Ruth Adams often saw them as threats, girls who could pose a danger to Wellesley's traditions and standards. That threat began with the undoing of the school's rooming policy.

Adams' records of past College correspondence show that as late as 1948, Wellesley had made a point of reassuring concerned white parents that their daughters would not have to live with incoming blacks. That mindset was still firmly in place when the unsuspecting African-American freshmen of 1965 arrived.

That year, four of the six black students, including Williamson, were paired off in double rooms. A fifth, Nancy Gist '69, had requested and been given a single. And unbeknownst to her, Wilson was picked for what Ethos members were later told was a grand experiment: She was placed with a Jewish roommate, and the situation was closely monitored by the College.

For young women who had had idealized visions of Wellesley, it was a bruising welcome. Carefully, Williamson and the others raised their concerns; when the administration promised it wouldn't happen again, the girls breathed a sigh



Wellesley to Add 20 Negro Freshmen

'We will be under pressure for the indefinite future. We will have to respond with appropriate sympathy, with mandatory realism, with speed, with good judgment. We must anticipate tension, exasperation, frustration, and sometimes fury. But we must, above all else, work to preserve the community, to see education as the justification of all we do, to keep Wellesley healthy, alive, and functioning.'

—President Ruth Adams

of relief, convinced the problem was over. But the very next year, in 1966, Wellesley admitted 11 black students—and assigned all of them to single rooms. Then, and only then, did the students resolve to fight back.

The fight rolled into 1967, as the administration sought to preserve its policy without admitting to segregation. In an internal memo to Adams that year, then-residence director F. Eleanor Milton Tenney '25 spelled out the policy in black and white. "Room a negro girl (asking for a double) in a single or with another negro unless a white girl has asked for a negro." Exasperated by the growing crisis, Tenney went on: "The Ethos group seems to be asking . . . that all of them be paired willy-nilly. I don't think they really mean this at all, but how to satisfy them?"

Ethos, the College soon learned, would not be satisfied. Determined to force Wellesley's hand, the students launched their first bomb against the administration: They went public—circulating petitions, penning editorials, and, in their most damaging strike, alerting a major scholarship agency that referred top black students to elite colleges.

Within weeks, student organizations and civil rights groups from across the country flooded Adams' office with telegrams, urging the College to reverse the policy. It marked the death knell for segregated housing on campus, and Ethos' first victory. In a 1967 memo, Adams pledged to modify freshman housing forms to eliminate any identification of race or racial preference.

"You have to understand, the College was in a traumatic transformation," says Stephen London, an early Ethos ally and sociology professor now teaching at Simmons. "It wasn't just Wellesley. It was characteristic of many colleges that were not prepared for the sea change that the civil rights movement was very clearly bringing about. We have the hindsight of history and experience. But this was brand-new."

To the administration, the Ethos students may have seemed brazen. But they were also terrified. "When we went to mail that letter [to the scholarship agency], all four of us went to that mailbox," says Williamson, now vice president of a business-services firm in Maryland. "We figured if the administration wanted to put somebody out, they'd have to put all four of us out. Because if one of us got put out, we knew our parents would kill us."

Emboldened by the success with housing, Ethos raised the stakes even higher. On April 22, 1968, 18 days after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the group issued a now-famous list of demands, urgently calling for an increase in black students, faculty, and staff, and an overhaul of College policies with respect to diversity (see opposite page). When the College wavered, calling for gradual change and cooler heads, Ethos refused to blink: Now, the group wanted 20 black students added to the very next incoming class. If Wellesley did not agree to meet the demand within 24 hours, there would be a hunger strike.

Compared to other campuses, the approach almost seemed subdued. At Columbia that spring, black students barricaded

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—Yvonne Smith Madlock '70

themselves in a building, took a dean hostage, and dispatched white supporters to take over other campus buildings. A year later, at Cornell, black students draped in ammunition belts shocked the nation by taking over a building with shotguns.

But at those schools, blacks had much greater strength in numbers. By comparison, Ethos was not only tiny—numbering only about 20—but it was a tiny group of *women*, making its stand against the College all the more remarkable. Almost instantly, the threatened hunger strike put Wellesley in the media spotlight, pulling Adams and the College’s trustees directly into the line of fire.

The night before announcing the strike to the media, it fell on Wardlaw to do something almost unheard of for a student of any race back then: pick up the phone and call John Quarles, then the chairman of Wellesley’s board of trustees.

“How this was decided, I don’t know,” says Wardlaw. “But I called him from my dorm, and he took the call. And I just simply informed him that we were going to initiate a hunger strike, and we were going to have a press conference to announce this. And he thanked me for the call, and that was the end of the conversation.”

The next day, it dawned on Wardlaw that the administration might have its own case of nerves: Moments before the packed press conference began, she recalls, Adams approached the students in the hall and began talking about the winning horse at the Triple Crown’s Preakness. “It was like she was trying to defuse this big ball of energy we had assembled,” Wardlaw says. “Like, ‘What am I going to do with these girls?’” Facing the cameras and a surging tide of change, Adams agreed to act on the demands. As a result, Wardlaw says, “We did not miss a meal.”

In a published letter announcing the major reforms, Adams pleaded for unity. “We will be under pressure for the indefinite future,” she wrote. “We will have to respond with appropriate sympathy, with mandatory realism, with speed, with good judgment. We must anticipate tension, exasperation, frustration, and sometimes fury. But we must, above all else, work to preserve the community, to see education as the justification of all we do, to keep Wellesley healthy, alive, and functioning.”

The students could hardly have known what kind of strain Adams was under. From the moment she had taken office in 1966, the pressure on her had been enormous. As she steered

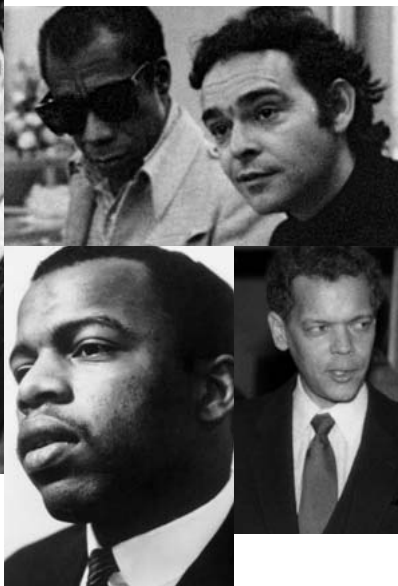


Wellesley through revolts that gripped the campus—over race, Vietnam, the curriculum, and its legendary parietals (social restrictions)—she had to fight for her own survival, as factions of trustees, alumnae, faculty, and staff who opposed the rapid changes tried to unseat her. Phillip Phibbs, Adams’ former executive assistant, says the efforts to undermine her left her feeling anguished and deeply isolated.

“It was a terrible struggle. You wanted to do right by the College, and you wanted to do right by the students,” says Phibbs, who went on to serve as president of the University of Puget Sound in Washington before retiring. “We didn’t always convey that sense, possibly. But these were times of anger, and it was hard to do the right thing because the anger caused people to suspect motives of other people.”

Within days of the press conference, Adams found herself caught between students deeply skeptical of her promises to recruit blacks, and others convinced that recruiting black students quickly would compromise academic standards. In that explosive climate, she launched an aggressive and costly campaign to recruit 20 more black students for the class of 1972.

It was an impossible goal: The academic year was nearly over, high-school seniors had committed to other schools, and the College had already sent rejection letters to wait-listed students, black and white. Still, Wellesley sent out close to 4,000 letters to schools and educational groups, waived fees for hundreds



The power and politics of hair (opposite): By 1969, grooming Afros became a specialty of Yvonne Smith Madlock '70. Here, she styles June Corey '70, as Carolyn Alsup '72 (back left) and Francine Guy '71 (back right) look on.

Archival photos (above) capture black leaders on campus during the late 1960s and 1970s, including (clockwise) Jesse Jackson, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Julian Bond, and Georgia Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis.

of applicants, tapped alumnae across the country, and dispatched Ethos members up and down the East Coast, into the South, and as far as Chicago, all in an effort to find students.

After clashing bitterly, Ethos and Wellesley were now working in concert, creating the building blocks of the College's admissions network for diversity. Having long defined themselves in opposition to the administration, the students now found themselves with an entirely new mission: to represent the College and give other black students a reason to choose Wellesley. In a remarkable 12-page document, they did just that, speaking in a collective voice about how they had struggled and what they had achieved. "The atmosphere at Wellesley fosters an attitude of self-awareness to such a great degree that it is often painful," the 1968 document read. "But if you can survive it, and most of us do, you come out knowing yourself intensely."

No additional students came that fall of 1968. But the very next year, the impact of the recruiting effort was undeniable: As Ethos' founders graduated, Wellesley welcomed 57 blacks to its freshman class.

In retrospect, the founders say, the same youthful determination that forced change on the College at times blinded them to the complexities of moving a major institution forward.

"At the time of course, we were passionate. You know, 'The revolution will not be televised' and all that was going on," says Williamson. "We were young and didn't have the patience we have now."

Today, after years of writing and research in black studies, Wilson gets paid to lecture on issues of race and equality. But back then, she already considered herself an expert. "I laugh every time I look at this article from the school newspaper, with the headline 'Fran Rusan of Ethos Explains Black Power,'" Wilson says. "I mean, oh my God. I see that person who is purporting to explain Black Power, to Wellesley people."

In their bravado they discovered themselves. It began with the most outward signs of rebellion, rejecting their mothers' straight perms and adopting the symbol of black womanhood: the Afro. Madlock, who confesses she knew nothing about hair, quickly became the resident barber. "There was hair all over the place, which was frankly hysterical," she says. "We would just get out the scissors and say, you know, 'Who's going to get one tonight? Who's going to join church, so to speak?'"

Soon, that discovery of self deepened, as members of Ethos reached outside their race and took on leadership roles campus-wide. By the end of her junior year, Wilson was running against Hillary Rodham Clinton '69 for the office of College Government president. Janet McDonald Hill '69, another black student, was elected chief justice of the General Court (now known as General Judiciary). Williamson served as bursar of College Government and house president of Claffin. And eventually, her leadership at Wellesley would take her on the most improbable of journeys—from a campus firebrand to a committed ambassador, first as an alumnae admissions recruiter, then class president, president of the Washington Wellesley Club, and now as a member of the Alumnae Association Board of Directors.

"I can tell you, I had no idea that I would be this active in the College," Williamson says. "God, who knows, I'm a late bloomer. But I really think that my experiences here have helped me, and I really want to see other African-American women have the same experience . . . to have the opportunity to go to a place where they can really become who they're supposed to be."

That wish, Ethos alums from later years say, has been fulfilled many, many times over.

"Their insistence that Wellesley admit more than token numbers of black women, their example that one can certainly question power, speak truth to it, and yes, sometimes even fight it, made much of what the rest of us achieved at Wellesley possible," says Karen Grigsby Bates '73, a correspondent for National Public Radio and one of the students recruited into Wellesley's first large African-American class. "We owe them big. We always will." **W**

Francie Latour is an associate editor at Wellesley magazine.



Ethos Today

From 1968 to 1969, the number of African-American students in the entering class at Wellesley shot up from 7 to 57—a staggering 700 percent increase. That record year, blacks made up just over 10 percent of their freshman class.

But in the years since, those numbers have dropped significantly: Since 2000, the number of black first-years has hovered between 25 and 33, and today, blacks make up about 6 percent of the total student body.

The picture of racial diversity today is far more complex than in the late '60s—in part because of a dramatic jump in the numbers of Asian, Latina, and international students of all races, but also because students with black heritage increasingly identify as biracial or multiracial. Still, to Ethos copresidents Shayla Adams '08 and Bai Kamara '08, the numbers signal an ongoing challenge, and reaffirm the need for Ethos today—as a support network, as a force for change, and as an advocate for equality beyond Wellesley's walls.

"It's not as much in your face," Kamara says of racial problems on campus, "but I still think with the tenuring of black faculty [and] the recruitment of minority students, those are things that are still ongoing. These are things I don't know if we'll ever resolve."

Today, blacks represent just over 5 percent of total faculty. Responding to the drop in black professors, the Office of the Dean of the College has launched a major initiative to recruit more faculty of color, including a dedicated minority hiring committee.

With 93 members, Ethos has worked to preserve the group's most vital legacies, fighting for racial diversity and creating forums for dialogues on race. Ethos has also helped bolster resources for struggling students of all races, including a help

center for students in economics courses. And it has continued



Students and alumni gathered at the 40th-anniversary celebration of Ethos in April. Through the years, Ethos' literary magazine, Brown Sister, (below, left) charted African-American cultural life at the College.

to host the most large-scale events of any cultural student group on campus.

At the same time, Ethos has served as a public face for Wellesley's response to issues of inequality in the wider world:

An annual fund-raiser for victims of Hurricane Katrina raised \$6,000 in its first year; last year, Ethos organized a major protest rally in support of the Jena Six, a group of black teenagers whose court case in Jena, La., sparked a national outcry.

After 40 years of activism, Kamara and Adams say, the group faces some of the same struggles it did from its earliest days—including charges by some that the group is separatist or exclusionary. In fact, they say, Ethos' unique role mirrors the role the College has played in women's lives for over a century.

"People today still ask why we need our own organization," Adams says. "But like someone recently said to me, whenever people ask, 'Why do you need an Ethos?', the question I ask back to them is, 'Why do we need a Wellesley?'"

—FL

