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Saving Halo G.R.E.E.N.

On March 11th, a GroupMe message arrived like an unexpected storm on a clear day. "Attachment: 1 Video - What are they doing to the garden?" Lamar Wilson, a sophomore at Howard university, demanded answers. 4:39 pm "Can people come out here they're bulldozing everything". These words still echo with grief in the hearts of its community. Our 13 year old enduring garden had been destroyed. The garden, a sanctuary of color and love, was now nothing but a rodent infested, scabbed plot of grass and we were left without answers. Why was the HU Halo Green Garden destroyed and how does this contribute to the deteriorating trust between admin and students?

The truck parked outside the gates to the campus' floral refuge read in bold blue letters "Brightview". As written on their company's official website, Brightview is a commercial landscaping company claiming to be a "dependable partner that can see you through the entire lifecycle of our landscape.." additionally, "offering thoughtful solutions in an experience, consistent in both quality and reliability." (Brightview). Humorously in contrast, Men in neon vests stood idly around the garden's remains as we, stewards of this space, began pouring into the gates to behold the massacre. The ruins consisted of two cherry trees, one fig tree, one peach tree and one apple tree. Vibrant red beets were scattered in tens across the lot and the leafy greens had all toppled over and began to brown. At this moment, our tongues so desperately wanted the satisfaction of blaming Brightview for what happened. Our fingers, pointed in fury, all slowly began to drop when the site worker admitted, "You guys [Howard

University] made the call". Our minds buzzed with confusion and our hearts ached with betrayal. Who would allow this to happen without consulting the gardens e-board first?

We were told that the composting station inside the Halo Garden was linked to the rat infestation in Howard's Plaza Towers East and West. The claim was that the garden had extensive rat boroughs because of this, and that the problem could only be mitigated by excavating the land and poisoning the soil. The president of the club, Zoe Cocker explained that there is more context to the situation. The gardens e-board members reported to Howard the first time there were sightings of mice. The club hosted a number of composting demos so that community members knew what food scrapings were not compostable. In addition to this, residents of Plaza Towers used their eight story windows as trash shoots and the garden as their dumping grounds. Zoe explains " Though this frustrated us, we always cleaned up afterwards." She asked to be included in the process of solutions for the rodent problem but was denied that courtesy. The president of the club illustrated, "This problem escalated due to a lack of consistent communication, care, and sense of urgency from HU administration - not us." We were visited by Glen Vinson, the associate vice president of the Office of Student Affairs and the director of Emergency Management and Safety, Ariel Triplett. From my personal account of speaking with the pair, they also shared that they had no idea who made the call to collapse the entire garden, they couldn't answer for how bad the burroughs really were nor did they understand why we were not notified of this order for construction. "The right hand never knows what the left is doing" were Triplett's remarks.

This incident does not serve as Howard's first time failing to communicate and care for its students. CNN did an article magnifying one of these instances. It occurred in 2018 when Howard University faced significant backlash due to a financial aid scandal. It came to light that the university had mismanaged funds, leading to financial aid packages being misappropriated, as well as delayed (Kiely and Brocchetto). This mismanagement left many students unsure of how they would afford things like tuition and housing to name a few. This is what Howard gets

away with. Leaving us blindsighted and in precarious situations. The failure to effectively communicate the problem and administer timely solutions left tremendous consequences for Howard University students. Many were forced to take out additional loans, find part-time work, or even consider dropping out altogether. Like these students in 2018 and our members of the garden in 2024, our incidents alike eroded trust between the student body and the university administration. Students time and time again are betrayed and abandoned by an institution that we trusted to support us.

I felt even further betrayed by our school's Literary publisher, the hilltop. Though members of the organization were present to watch the story unfold and even communally shared the disdain for the situation, via an instagram post, they wrote "...the university explained that several students complained of rodent sightings in the Howard Towers residence halls earlier this school year, and a subsequent investigation found that those rodents were thriving on food in the composting site within the Halo G.R.E.E.N. Garden." (Jean-Jacques and Smith). This explanation felt unfair for one obvious reason. It was communicated by an Instagram user,

@camrynrcurtis: "you continue to paint a false narrative in defense of the university. where is the accountability? there were rats before the garden, we live in DC, A MAJOR CITY. don't you DARE blame this on us."

That is exactly it, how dare they blame us? The department of Health reported that in nine months into 2023 there were over 16,000 complaints of rats in the District of Columbia (Hamburg).

Though the outrage present in the Instagram comments were thoroughly justified, it is important that we as a student body understand and reaffirm who our real opponents are. The reporters of this issue were not, it is the organization that they represent, the Hilltop. A vehicle for the interest of Howard, its PR wing at best. I am aware that there will be members of oppressed groups that fail to recognize the disparities and eventually contribute to their own

oppression. Despite these hiccups, the garden did have an overwhelming amount of support from its past members and DC community. GroupMe user Jay Lin wrote to us all,

“I’m so sorry this is happening 😞 I saw how they dumped stuff near the memorial y’all created for Micah. This university never fails to be wicked. *Be we wickeder dan dem*. I went there today with a fellow priest to pray over the land and that it and everyone who’s ever touched it. Here to support where I can and where yall need me. ❤️”

From there on the gardens e-board team have worked tirelessly to pick up the pieces and plan for rebuilding. The community managed to work together to relocate the remaining plants to Sankofa Video Books & Cafe at 2714 Georgia Ave NW. A GoFundMe was created to help purchase tools for the garden and events are now being hosted in what remains of the garden.

Howard University should consider that careless destruction to green spaces in DC has aggressive impacts on members of low socioeconomic class including students on Howard University's campus. As climate change persists, persons in urban areas are turning into heat islands and vulnerable communities are at risk of dying from heat exposure. “Urban tree cover and vegetation provide crucial environmental benefits such as decreasing air pollution” as well combatting the urban heat island effect. (Shukla). Keeping spaces like Halo Green Garden provide relief for our communities. We have a right as students to demand clear communication when our campus is undergoing changes that we believe compromises our best interest. Howard University is dedicated to truth and service and it is time that we keep them to their word and speak up!

Help Restore the HU Halo G.R.E.E.N. Community Garden GoFundMe
<https://tr.ee/MdEsoVrUyf>

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