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Alumni and Students Challenge IWU's Record on Racial Equality

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WGLT Interview with IWU Staff/Alumni, June 5, 2020

Announcer: Alumni at Illinois Wesleyan say it's delayed and muted response to George Floyd's death and calls for racial justice are the latest examples of what they have seen for years. They say the private liberal arts college has uneven record on racial equity more from Eric Stock.

Eric Stock: Rosetta Clay identifies herself as a proud black woman. Clay is Illinois Wesleyan's director of alumni engagement. She says she noticed a problem the first time she set foot on campus.

Rosetta Clay: when I interviewed with Illinois Wesleyan nearly two years ago I said to the then president I have been on this campus for 8 hours and I've seen one black person and that's a problem for me. But here I am I still took the job.

Stock: Clay raises money for the university last week the university post-poned a one-day fundraising campaign called all in for Wesleyan Clay was supposed to lead. Instead, Clay took part in a virtual listening session with the university administrator's students and alumni on how to be a more inclusive campus at a time some alumni say they may cut ties with the university. Recent graduate Kaylen Grey says he won't give the Illinois Wesleyan until it improves its culture for minorities he says IWU prides itself for twice hosting Martin Luther King to speak but doesn't follow his teachings on race. Grey says he's also upset over the university's neutral statement that referred to Floyd's death as painful and an incidence of looting and violence were unfortunate.

Kaylen Grey: Although I am disappointed, I am not surprised. This type of response to racism on campus is part of this culture a culture that tries to praise itself for diversity and inclusion yet is essentially silent on challenge to speak up. One that is scared to ruffle the feathers of an ignorant population that reflects the true nature of this university.

Stock: other graduates say they feel ambivalent about Illinois Wesleyan Citlalli Gonzalez says she had an amazing experience but felt like she never truly belonged because she's a minority she says she needed to hear three words from the university after George Floyd's death.

Gonzalez: how hard it is to say Black Lives Matter that was all I was looking for from the statement and I was very disappointed that it was reduced to a political opinion.

Stock: some students say after four years on campus they were sick of being there without black counselors to talk with. Luis Cabrales-Vasquez says there were no easy ways to report racism university president Georgia Nugent initially declined to make a statement about calls for racial justice after Floyd's death Nugent said she would not get into politics. After Nugent's statement, Vasquez called on alumni to take their money and give it to black organizations instead.

Vasquez: When the president decided not to make a statement it broke my heart and I'll make that very clear because she is a white woman and the school will go around and say feminism this is our first

female president but all it does is it reinforces the fact that there is no space for blackness in white feminism.

Stock: The rest of the university community pushed back hard as well, Nugent has relented and now says Illinois Wesleyan must do better.

Georgia Nugent: I want to apologize I understand I truly understand that the statement made by the university didn't go far enough and wasn't clear enough.

Stock: Jazmine Kellogg graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 2016 says if it were not for the University's diversity and inclusion office supporting her she likely never would of finished.

Jazmine Kellogg: Every year from being denied into the frat houses or my friends being told they had to leave parties because black b-words weren't welcome the N word being spread around campus violent candor in classrooms and much more I chose to stay ever year.

Stock: a number of former students who took part in the call say Illinois Wesleyan needs to do more and have intuitional resources available and must foster a culture of inclusion. Dion Hornsby says the university is far more diverse than it was when he arrived on campus as a student 27 years ago. He says that's a long time to fight a battle he shouldn't have to fight.

Dion Hornsby: understanding the black folk are tired were tired of having to carry the burden of any injustice that goes on in the world that we have to fix problems that we had no hand in making.

Stock: the former students all say as black and brown people they can't achieve equality on their own they need help from the majority of white population on campus. Illinois Wesleyan director for student involvement Kevin Carrey says silence is complicit racism.

Kevin Carrey: especially my white identified allies how can we respectfully challenged those around us to show up to listen to learn and continue their self-education journeys not relying on black individuals or black communities of color or other non-privilege identities to teach us or to tell us or to remind us how to be better.

Stock: the virtual meeting is a good first step in discussion for some Hannah Mesouani heads Illinois Wesleyans office of diversity and inclusion.

Hannah Mesouani: to fix something to change something we have to name it. Today we've named yes only a fraction of how were feeling, but it's a huge step to name it publicly to claim it. To claim our pride but to also claim our heart.

Stock: Mesouani says her office plans to hold more webinars on social justice and what many on campus say be a long road to improvement. I'm Eric Stock.