



News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 26, 2018

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Pitt Moves Toward Renaming Parran Hall, a Victory for Graduate Employee Union

PITTSBURGH – Members of the Graduate Student Organizing Committee working to build a union of grad student employees at the University of Pittsburgh today applauded the recommendation by Pitt’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion Review Committee on Parran Hall to rename the building.

“Being a student and employee of the Graduate School of Public Health, I am overjoyed to hear the news,” said India Hunter, a graduate student in Behavioral and Community Health Sciences in the Graduate School of Public Health, which is partially housed in Parran Hall. “For the black community, the name change shows us that Pitt is making efforts to truly become an inclusive university for us all.”

Chancellor Patrick Gallagher is recommending the university’s board of trustees approve a name change for the building named for Thomas Parran Jr., former U.S. surgeon general who oversaw the notorious Tuskegee syphilis experiment and Guatemala syphilis experiment and who later served as dean of the university’s School of Public Health.

The Pitt grad union organizers’ delivery of over 1,300 petitions calling for a name change was cited in the committee’s report on how they came to the conclusion that the building should be renamed.

“We’re overwhelmed with joy at the committee’s report. This is verification of the belief that when communities come together in search of justice, and when we organize, that our voices will be heard,” said Theresa Gmelin, a graduate student employee in the Epidemiology Department in the Graduate School of Public Health.

In April, Pitt grad union organizers submitted the petitions to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion committee as well as to Chancellor Gallagher via Pamela Connelly, Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion, and Dean Donald Burke of the Graduate School of Public Health.

“Our petitions also called on the University to use a democratic and transparent process in the renaming of the building, and we will continue to urge the administration to include students, faculty, and staff in the conversation,” said Abby Cartus, also a graduate student employee in the Epidemiology Department. “Ultimately, the decision to rename the building will be made by the Board of Trustees, and we will continue organizing in the community to ensure that this positive change is made.”

Graduate student employees at Pitt are organizing as a union with the Academic Workers Association of the United Steelworkers. They’ve collected cards showing support and submitted them to the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board (PLRB) to start the union election process. A PLRB hearing in October will determine the union’s legal right to organize.

"This win couldn't have come at a better time. Our community is going through a lot of pain grappling with the murder of Antwon Rose. The message this decision sends will resonate across our region -the lives of communities of color matter," said Helen Ann Lawless, MPH student and Evans Fellow in Behavioral and Community Health Sciences. "Delivered side by side, the evidence and pressure we brought to this issue undoubtedly led to our success. This win was only made possible through collective action. Although this is an uplifting moment, now is no time to settle. We must continue to hold racist systems and institutions accountable."

The Academic Workers Association is part of the USW, which represents 850,000 workers in North America employed in many industries that include metals, rubber, chemicals, paper, oil refining, the service and public sectors and higher education.

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