

# Howard students host nighttime chess game to raise funds for competition

By [Clarence Williams](#)

Updated November 4, 2022 at 8:00 a.m. EDT | Published November 4, 2022 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

As the evening sky darkened across the Yard at Howard University, school chess club members unfurled a parachute-size board across the historic lawn.

The players carefully placed large plastic pieces that glowed red and blue in the night before they stood on opposite sides of the large chessboard to strategize how to capture the opposing king. Neon blue represented the white pieces, red the black.

Small robots delivering food crisscrossed the sidewalks. Students carrying backpacks paced across the center of campus, while a small group sang African lyrics from Ghanaian and Nigerian songs above ancient rhythms banged on an apentemma drum and a Dawuro bell, which sounds similar to a cowbell.

Early in the contest, Howard Chess Club president Malik Castro-DeVarona swung a bishop to take the queen side knight from his opponent Lloyd Davis.

“First blood!” Castro-DeVarona declared. Davis quickly retaliated with a move from his queen to take the intruding bishop. The handful of club members who watched shouted, “Woo!” as Davis knocked the piece off the board.

“So it’s like that, huh? It’s like that, huh?” Castro-DeVarona responded.

The nighttime game on Wednesday was a friendly match, but played in public with a specific purpose: to attract attention to the school’s small chess club, both to increase membership and to launch a fundraising campaign to help the group enter an intercollegiate competition in January.

Being able to compete and win matches matters most, but their entry also means a lot, club leaders say.

“One thing we really pride ourselves being is the only HBCU chess club that’s competed in recent years,” said Castro-DeVarona, a 20-year-old political science major from Los Angeles. “The last time we went there, we were the only all-Black team competing in the tournament.”

“We trying to go there and really show out,” he said. “It’s the biggest congregation of competitive collegiate chess that we have. We definitely feel like we are representing a lot of people when we are out there.”

Club leaders want to send an A team and a B team to compete in the Pan-American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship in early January, Castro-DeVarona said. The team began an online fundraiser to reach a \$9,000 goal to pay for eight players to travel to Seattle.

The decades-old competition is expected to draw more than 100 schools for the three-day event, which includes a tournament, career fair and workshops designed to help students after graduation, said Brad Tenenholtz, an owner of Corporate Esports Association, the tournament’s host.

“We are trying to offer students something beyond just chess,” Tenenholtz said.

Beyond the fundraising, Wednesday night’s public games were designed to draw in new members. The Howard Chess Club has existed on and off throughout the school’s history, Castro-DeVarona said, but has only about a dozen members who meet on Monday and Wednesday evenings each week.

Pandemic boredom and a Netflix show, “The Queen’s Gambit,” rekindled a love of the game for Davis, a senior majoring in political science who played Castro-DeVarona in the opening match. The Rochester, N.Y., native learned the game as a child from his parents but now finds the weekly sessions important to fueling his competitive side.

“I got to meet people and got to hang out with friends; I slowly but surely got better and better. I got to play faster times,” Davis said.

Wednesday’s outdoor nocturnal game set was donated by Jamaal Abdul-Alim, a writer and longtime chess journalist who has served as an informal adviser to club members to help raise attention to their existence and their fundraising.

“Sometimes people don’t even know there is a chess club here. It’s important to invest in the chess players,” said Abdul-Alim, who has covered chess since 2005. “They’ve got a strong game. I’ve been in quite a few games where I thought I was winning, and they showed me otherwise.”

Abdul-Alim, said he has covered a “final four” of collegiate chess. The January competition would help Howard to qualify. The club won their section the last time they competed

“It’s to chess what March Madness is in basketball,” Abdul-Alim said. “It’s important. This is probably the only historically Black college and university represented at that tournament.

“We wish it was otherwise.”

Abdul-Alim said he is impressed by the dedication shown by the club and how members have grown as players and as a team by inviting a chess master to speak to the club and help them learn.

“This is a serious club,” Abdul-Alim said. “They are looking to prove themselves in the chess world and play at the highest level they can.”

Wednesday night’s match ended as Castro-DeVarona moved his queen to C7 and cornered his opponent’s king. Davis conceded the defeat.