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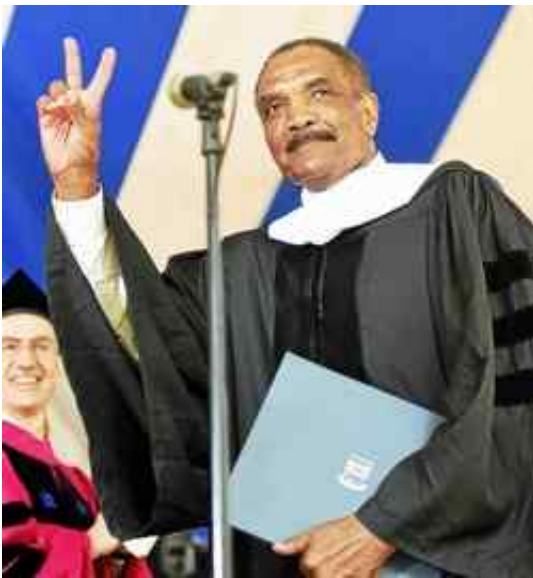
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By Ed Stannard, New Haven Register

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NEW HAVEN >> For [Yale](#) football great [Calvin Hill](#), receiving an honorary doctorate from his alma mater was “more shocking than getting drafted” by the National Football League.

Hill, a star running back for Yale, class of 1969, and then for the [Dallas Cowboys](#), was one of nine honorary degree recipients at Yale’s 315th commencement Monday. The honorees, including Broadway star [Audra McDonald](#), joined 3,628 undergraduates and graduates who had earned degrees.

“For a Yale grad it’s the best,” Hill said during the procession to Old Campus. He was drafted 24th overall by the Cowboys, the first player from an Ivy League school to be picked in the first round. He and quarterback Brian Dowling led Yale to league championships in 1967 and ’68 and he also holds Yale’s record for the outdoor triple jump.

[PHOTOS: Yale 2016 commencement](#)

As rookie of the year and All Pro, he was the first Cowboy to rush for 1,000 yards in a season and played in the team’s first Super Bowl. “You are a Yale legend,” President Peter Salovey said in his citation. “On the field and off, leadership, character and service have been the hallmarks of your life.”

McDonald, before commencement began, said she was “feeling incredibly blessed and honored. I’m excited to be here.” Winner of a record six Tony Awards, two Grammys and an Emmy, she has starred on Broadway in “A Raisin in the Sun,” “The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess” and “Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill.”

Salovey said, “You marry effortless craft with soulful and surprising interpretation. To the wider world, you have raised your voice as an advocate for the LGBTQ community.”

[Alice Waters](#), a chef and leader in the organic and local food movements, was given an honorary degree for her culinary career, including founding Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, and for educating children around the world about healthful food and agriculture. She also helped create the [Yale Sustainable Food Program](#) when her daughter attended the school and serves on its advisory board.

“You have helped us understand that the importance of food extends beyond the dinner table to environmental stewardship, health, ethics and education,” Salovey said. “Your Edible Schoolyard Project is transforming the way children eat, as well as reforming the systems that produce their food.”

[George C. Wolfe](#) has won Tony Awards for directing “Angels in America” and “Bring in ’da Noise, Bring in ’da Funk.” He also directed “Jelly’s Last Jam” and “The Normal Heart,” which, like “Angels in America,” dealt with the AIDS crisis. He wrote and directed “All That Followed,” now running on Broadway. “You bring to light stories of what it is to be an American — our struggles, our triumphs, our history,” Salovey said.

Canadian Supreme Court Justice [Rosalie Silberman Abella](#) is the first Jewish woman appointed to the court. The daughter of two Holocaust survivors, she was appointed commissioner of the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, working to reduce workplace bias against women, minorities and disabled people.

Ground-breaking work on ribonucleic acid and genome-editing techniques are among the accomplishments of [Jennifer Doudna](#), a professor of chemistry and molecular and cell biology at the University of California at Berkeley. She was on Yale’s faculty from 1994 to 2002. Salovey said her work in editing genomes will help treat cystic fibrosis and sickle cell anemia, among other genetic diseases.

The writer [Haruki Murakami](#) has become the most widely read current Japanese novelist with 11 million copies of “Norwegian Wood” sold in Japan alone. “In your books, you create surreal universes of fantasy, dream, science fiction and allegory,” his citation read.

[Arnold Rampersad](#) was honored for notable biographies of prominent African Americans, including W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson. A professor at Stanford University, he is a native of Trinidad. His biography of Ralph Ellison was a 2007 National Book Award finalist. Salovey said his writing “reveals the invisible, sets a high standard and makes a distinctive contribution to our national culture.”

[David Saperstein](#)’s “life’s work has been to make life whole for those on society’s margins,” Salovey said. Saperstein, a rabbi, was the first non-Christian named as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom by President Barack Obama. Previously, he served for 40 years as director of the [Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism](#), which advocates for civil rights, religious freedom and economic justice.

After the ceremony, graduates and their families made their way to residential colleges and graduate and professional schools for individual awarding of diplomas.

Modupeore Shenbanjo of Columbus, Ohio, a graduate of the School of Public Health, said she was “excited and very thankful. ... It’s been a grueling journey, stressful but really beautiful.”

Tom Melgar of Kalamazoo, Michigan, whose daughter, Danielle Melgar, received a bachelor’s degree in psychology, said, “It’s going to be a good financial relief,” adding, “We’re proud of her. She’s our hyper-achieving kid. She does everything under the sun, I think.”

Charles Cort of Portland, Maine, earned his master’s degree in business administration and said it felt odd to return to school six years after graduating from college. “It was two quick years for me for sure,” he said. “It’s a strange feeling but it flew right by.”

Returning to Yale for a graduate degree in nursing, Debdeep Nath met his future wife, Jane Adkins, during

the first week of school, according to Adkins' grandmother, Marilyn Adkins of Beaverton, Oregon. Nath's father, Dipak Nath of Kolkata, India, said, "We're very joyful and thankful to God also for this wonderful environment."

Wen Sheng of Wuhan, China, received a master's in computer science and said, "I'm really excited and I'm really appreciating my parents."

This story was edited to correct the gender of Modupeore Shenbanjo. Call Ed Stannard at 203-680-9382.

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