

Tragedy That Empowers

Sharon Risher's story

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Sharon Risher shared her story at the Howard Performing Arts Center. (Photo by Clarissa Carbungco, IM C student photographer)

By: Hannah Gallant, IM C student writer

On Thursday, Jan. 11, 2018, Sharon Risher spoke in the Howard Performing Arts Center on the campus of Andrews University. She shared her personal journey through and since June 17, 2015, when the lives of nine people were abruptly and horrifically ended in a church shooting at the Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This event irrevocably changed the course of Risher's life, as her mother Ethel Lee Lance, two cousins and a childhood friend were among those who died. As a result of this tragedy, Risher describes herself as "an accidental activist-someone who finds themselves in a life-altering experience and then springs into action for whatever specific cause or issue."

She recounted being nine years old, hearing Martin Luther King Jr. and thinking she wanted to learn to speak like him. In 1976, both Risher and her mother became the first people in her family to receive high school diplomas.

These moments all helped to shape Risher. "I didn't ask for this journey that I'm on... but here I am," she said. And now, her mission is to help other people understand that hate and violence will not win.

Risher emphasized her struggle with forgiveness. "There comes a time in our lives when we have to stand up for what we believe and be in that space for however long it takes. I had to feel what I felt. I was not going to hop on the forgiveness bandwagon," said Risher. Her process of forgiveness was complicated, lonely, hard and full of never-ending prayer. Ultimately, she expressed the importance of actually forgiving and continuing toward that end goal even when the journey is long and riddled with anger. Risher described her experience of forgiving as coming to a place of peace and feeling God say, "You're strong, you've been faithful, now is the time."

The idea of forgiveness especially resonated with the audience. R. Deborah Weithers, dean for Student Life at Andrews University, says, "Her journey of forgiveness was raw and honest and helped us put ourselves in her shoes."

Not only did Risher call the audience to embrace forgiveness, but she also stated, "As people of faith, messengers of God, we have a duty to begin the conversation about race... to truly understand the call to be a community." She addressed the importance of accountability and responsibility, particularly with gun control laws. Her dream is that people will escape this "heart condition" within America that places too much emphasis on hate and not enough on the understanding that "no matter what, we all are people." She continued, "We all are made wonderfully and beautifully, my faith tells me, in the sight of God."

Natalie Hwang, a second-year English literature major, appreciates Risher's perspective on hate and valuing others. Hwang says, "It was truly humbling to hear a woman who didn't let trauma distort the way she saw others."

At the conclusion of Risher's talk, she received a standing ovation from attendees. Garrison Hayes, a third-year Master of Divinity student, reflected on his response to Risher's story. He says, "I am thankful for her commitment to truth-telling and her ability to seamlessly intertwine her lived experience and her desire to see equity and justice everywhere."

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