

# Rise Up Against Abuse Rally Held at Andrews

Draws a passionate and concerned response from hundreds

[Campus News](#) | Posted on March 14, 2019



previousnext

Sarah Kelly, contemporary Christian singer/songwriter, worship leader and two-time Grammy Award nominee, was the guest speaker for University Forum on Thursday, March 7. The forum was the first event of the Rise Up Against Abuse Rally. (Photo by Jessica Condon, University Communication student photographer)

By: Hannah Gallant, University Communication student writer (with contributions from Nehemiah Sitler and Laura Fierce)

The first-ever Rise Up Against Abuse Rally was held on the campus of Andrews University from March 7–10, 2019. Sponsored by the Offices of University Wellness and Diversity & Inclusion, this rally was the official launch of the new Rise Up Against Abuse initiative, designed to help people use awareness, education, intervention and prevention to take decisive actions against all forms of abuse. More than 225 people registered for the three-day rally, which featured numerous abuse survivors, advocates and inspirational presenters including 2x Grammy nominee Sarah Kelly and Emmy-winning writer and filmmaker Chris Silber. There were workshops, training, presentations, expert panels, a concert, a Zumba party, a photo exhibition and a Solidarity Wall project.

The rally began on Thursday at University Forum in the Howard Performing Arts Center with 2x Grammy nominee and abuse survivor, Sarah Kelly. Kelly started out her presentation by singing her well-known song, “Take Me Away.” She then shared part of her story as an abuse survivor, detailing how she had poured herself into her music as a way of trying to stay safe and stay away from her abusive pastor husband. “Just like Paul and Silas I was in

my prison and I was choosing to worship God. I stood in the center of all the abuse and I chose to worship God,” she explained.

Following Sarah Kelly’s poignant presentation and mini-concert, attendees were then invited to visit the Solidarity Wall, a wall erected outside of the campus center from then until Thursday, March 14, for people to write messages of empowerment and support. Founded by Ty Gibson, this was the first time the Solidarity Wall has been brought to an Adventist campus. Those who walked past the wall were each given a letter and a chance to take a marker and add their own message of encouragement.

On Thursday evening, a photo exhibition premiere and reception were held for “Unredacted”, a violence against women photo exhibition created by Clarissa Carbungco, senior photography major at Andrews University. This exhibition remained open throughout the rest of the rally. Afterward, there was an “Abuse Awareness” Zumba celebration at Life Rx in Berrien Springs.

The rally continued on Friday, March 8, International Women’s Day, with a number of presentations throughout the day. Jennifer J. Schwirzer, a private counselor, writer, TV program host and presenter from Orlando, Florida, began by presenting “Why Should We Rise Up?” Her presentation mirrored the goals of the overall rally—to educate, listen, prevent and confront. Toward the end of her presentation, she spoke about the power of multiplication, which is the power of both ministering to victims and equipping them to rise up.

Sarah McDugal, Andrews alum, author, speaker and co-founder of Bucket Brigade Against Abuse and WILD (Women in Leadership Development), continued to stress the importance of being equipped with knowledge and truth in her presentation “Truths About Abusers.” She emphasized that abuse is not a set of isolated mistakes but rather a systemic pattern of beliefs and actions. “You can believe some of what they say, and everything they do,” she stated.

Following McDugal’s presentation, the Psalm82initiative, a ministry team that has been helping churches identify and deal with abuse for more than 15 years, did a presentation on patterns of abuse. The goal was to equip people to recognize abuse patterns and then offer help. Judith Fisher, director of the Counseling & Testing Center at Andrews University, and Nicole Parker, bestselling children’s author and biblical counselor, continued to talk about recognizing abuse, focusing specifically on emotional and sexual abuse. Following their presentation, Tanya Asim-Cooper, director of the Restoration and Justice Clinic and assistant clinical professor of law at the Pepperdine School of Law, used true stories and statistics to address interpretations of the Christian Bible as it applies to intimate partner violence (IPV). The Psalm82initiative then did a final segment on identifying and addressing abuse in religious contexts.

The second day of the rally came to an end on Friday evening at Proximity Vespers in the Pioneer Memorial Church. Sarah Kelly began the program by singing a couple of songs and sharing a bit more about her story. She invited the audience to understand the power of worship and how it can help someone going through the pain of abuse. “Worship is an awesome place to find the rest of your life,” she said.

Following a moving song service, Latoya Wright, an MDiv student at the Seminary, read the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, and discussed how the ugliness of that story is still happening today. She then told her own personal story of being a victim of sexual abuse and how that impacted her life for years. After her poignant and raw testimony, Wright ended the program by explaining what she calls, “the power of the ugly,” stating, “When

God's power overrides the ugly, that's when it becomes the power of the ugly." She implored the audience to let God take the ugly out of their lives, and to let him write their stories.

The rally continued on Sabbath morning with Sarah McDugal speaking at One Place in Newbold Auditorium, and Ty Gibson at Pioneer Memorial Church. On Saturday afternoon, Ty Gibson and Tacyana Nixon, assistant to the vice president for Campus & Student Life at Andrews University, hosted a discussion panel in the PMC Youth Chapel. Part 1 of the panel dealt with questions and concerns related to the church's involvement with abuse. Part 2 addressed the effects of abuse. Some of the questions that were raised included how to talk to children about abuse and how to minimize their chances of being abused.

After the discussion panels, Chris Silber, Emmy-winning writer and filmmaker, and Mekayla Eppers, Mrs. America 2018, shared their own personal experiences as survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Both were abused by friends of their parents and both had parents who were mostly absent during that time. They stressed how important it is for children to recognize what abuse is, and how adults need to believe children if they say they've been abused.

Following this special feature, Sarah Kelly and her husband and fellow musician, Jonas Ekman, performed a live concert to wrap up the evening. Through this musical journey, Kelly shared more of her songs and her personal story.

On Sunday morning, the rally continued with an "Emancipating Survivors" workshop designed only for survivors of abuse and their supporters. Afterward, there was an "Equipping Defenders" workshop for any attendee interested in learning more about how to identify perpetrators, handle criminal abuse, and serve as a defender and healer for abuse victims. Both workshops were led by a number of the rally's presenters including Jennifer Schwirzer, Nicole Parker, Sarah McDugal and Tacyana Nixon.

In the afternoon, Scott Ward, assistant professor of discipleship and religious education at the Seminary, shared how he survived abuse by diving deeper into a relationship with Jesus. His seminar focused on how to apply scripture narratives to the negative experiences and how journaling and worship can draw people closer to God.

The rally officially ended with a workshop titled, "Preventing LGBT+ Abuse: From Them vs. Us to Us with Them." Presenters included David Sedlacek, professor of family ministry and discipleship at the Seminary, Steve Yeagley, assistant vice president for Student Life, Curt VanderWaal, chair and professor for the Department of Social Work, and Shannon Trecartin, assistant professor of social work. Together they led an interactive discussion about how to have relational conversations that are helpful to families, churches and schools.

Overall, this event touched a number of people, including numerous abuse survivors. One attendee shared her personal story of how she came to attend the rally. "I heard about the event from Sarah McDugal. The day I called the national domestic abuse hotline and asked about my personal situation, a friend of mine connected me to her. She started talking to me about how to build a safety plan and I left the very next day. I was not prepared and she talked me through it. I had my two children with me, and she talked me all through all the basics: getting a burner phone, talking to the police, getting to a shelter, how to adjust my communications, and how to scrub my social networks so I could not be tracked. She's been a very important person to me and I wanted to come to hear more. I have a personal therapist but I think it's helpful to talk to other survivors and hear from other people that focus on this topic because you just don't know what you don't know. I heard some things

that were really surprising to me about healthy relationships and how mine was so very different than what apparently is normal. I heard a lot about how abusers work. When you leave an abusive situation, it's really easy to feel confused about what happened and to doubt your own reality and so to get delineation on what is abusive was really helpful to me."

Another attendee and Andrews alum, Margaret Michel, works in hospital chaplaincy and with those who are on hospice. At her job she has been exposed to numerous abuse victims. In fact, she recalls having to learn the statistics of what percentage of women who came to the emergency room were abused. "Much of what they are saying are things that I have seen as I've interacted with people, and I'm glad that at this point, the church is saying these things here on campus," she explained. For her, events like this are crucial for raising more awareness about the prevalence of abuse, and she hopes that the University continues to hold more events like this in the future.

"When Dominique and I began talking about the Rally, we honestly did not know what to expect. We didn't know how many people would show up, or how many people would even like the social media pages," said Michael Nixon, vice president for Diversity & Inclusion and cofounder of the Rise Up Against Abuse Initiative.

"As we expanded the planning team and started to get confirmations on speakers and presenters, our excitement started to build. We still didn't have clear answers to those initial questions, but we knew that God was definitely up to something. In retrospect, I can honestly say that God exceeded our wildest expectations. Every person that he led to be involved in this event, whether through attendance or presentation, brought something unique and vital to each space we occupied during the rally. I left feeling motivated, inspired and empowered to continue rising up against the heinous forms of abuse I see around me. We still don't know what God has in store for the Rise Up initiative going forward, but we are comforted in the assurance that He is in control. I am so excited to see what he does next!"

Dominique Gummelt, creator and co-founder of the initiative, was also thrilled with the success of the rally. She shared, "People were empowered through knowledge and education and they were comforted by hugs, prayers and words of encouragement. Important conversations and discussions took place on forming a more detailed plan of action related to church policy issues on the matter. All the guests who came to our campus expressed how impressed they were with the respectful, kind and loving young people on our campus and that they have never been to a place where they were so loved and welcomed. Thank you to President Luxton and Provost Arthur for their support in having this rally at Andrews University."