

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Lake Union Herald

Lake Union Herald

9-2022

Empowerment Through Connection

Isabella Koh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs>

► Caryn Cruz is a senior English major at Andrews University.



EMPOWERMENT THROUGH *Connection*

When Caryn Cruz was young, she had no idea that a dedication to empowering other women would lead her to become the president of a thriving campus club at Andrews University and foster a lifelong career goal. “People see your passions within you,” she remarks, looking back on where she began. Her search to be a part of something bigger than herself brought her on a journey of growth, leadership and connection.

BY ISABELLA KOH

Darren Heslop

Darren Heslop



▲ Caryn Cruz (center) and other coordinators of "Take Back the Night" gathered at the Andrews globe for the start of the April 2 march.



▲ Caryn Cruz (second from left) participated in a vespers program on the steps of Pioneer Memorial Church.

"I'm an English major, and I'm minoring in political science," Caryn explains. Her love for writing and reading led her straight into the field of study, as did her eventual goal of becoming an attorney. She says, "It just made sense to do English. . . . I heard that English majors always do really well on the LSAT and they excel in areas of law because of what we study: dissecting material, analyzing, writing, reading."

With two parents who worked as pastors, she recognizes a distinct culture that flowed through her early years of life. Her family moved around for many years before settling in Arizona, where she attended Thunderbird Adventist Academy. Caryn recalls a close-knit household that was constantly full of people and visitors. She and her three sisters learned to always be ready for a spontaneous church performance, and she laughingly notes, "I'm so used to my dad, on the spot, asking his daughters to come up and sing for him, even if we didn't know what we were going to sing."

When she began thinking about college, Caryn had her heart set on going to La Sierra University. Her plans shifted, however, when her older sister, Carolina, decided to attend Andrews University. The more Caryn learned about Andrews from her sister, the more fascinated she became. Eventually, she decided that she would move to Berrien Springs for her own college years. "I really liked hearing about how Andrews was at the forefront of talking about social issues," Caryn notes.

"You can tell that they have hearts and they care about people. They care about community and serving. It convinced me enough to move out there."

As soon as she arrived on campus, Caryn immersed herself in many of the activities and clubs hosted by students, faculty and staff, including the J.N. Andrews Honors Program, the pre-law club and Sigma Tau Delta, the English honor society. She has a deep appreciation for the leadership at Andrews and the culture they have fostered on campus. "I personally feel like Andrews does a good job at empowering its students through events and programs," she explains. One of her preferred ways to relax and form relationships with others has been through participation in worship teams. Although singing for chapels and vespers is an additional responsibility, she remarks, "It's always a nice break whenever I'm having a busy week. . . . for me, it's a nice time to relax and also feel connected to campus."

In 2019, at the beginning of Caryn's freshman year, a new student club was officially launched—the Women's Empowerment Association of Andrews University (WEAAU). Her sister, Carolina, had been one of the first club officers the prior year and, knowing Caryn's passion for the topic, looped her into the group. Caryn served as secretary that year, beginning a foundational relationship with the club that would last through her entire Andrews experience.

“I wish I could say I’ve always been pro-women’s empowerment,” Caryn admits thoughtfully. “Growing up, I just didn’t really know what that meant.” She remembers a time when a male friend asked her if she was a feminist and his relief when she instinctively shut him down. Like many others, she believed that the feminist movement was centered around an opposition to men. “I think it was just a few years after that that I started to understand more of what the feminist movement was,” she reflects.

Although Caryn’s personal journey with women’s empowerment stemmed from her own curiosity, many of her family members served as key role models. Growing up, she watched her mom, aunts and grandmothers overcome the obstacles life threw at them, noting, “I think it really does inspire me to keep pushing.” Her dad, as well, has been a strong supporter of women’s rights, and she recognizes, “Both of my parents have taught me a lot.” She values her family’s support deeply and credits them with having encouraged her passions and worldview.

Caryn’s interest in and dedication to the topic were a perfect fit for WEAAU. The mission of the Women’s Empowerment Association is to “inspire change by encouraging discussion, facilitating learning experiences, and creating a fun environment for our club members.” Although they focus on supporting growth and connection among women, they welcome members of any gender and background to join them.

WEAAU has worked to provide empowerment to women on a number of fronts, including leadership, mentorship and community service. The team also decided to address the societal issue of sexual assault, hoping to provide support to victims and help women obtain resources to stand up for themselves and others. Through taking on the difficult topic, Caryn hoped to build a strong, supportive female community, both on and off campus. “This is not a political club. This is not a political ideology. I, personally, am not coming to this club with a political agenda,” Caryn conveys. “This club, in a small way, is making an impact to empower women to connect with each other.”

One of the first events Caryn helped to arrange occurred in April of 2020 and was in addition to her work with WEAAU. The program highlighted Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month and provided support

during a difficult time. Despite the constraints that COVID had instituted that summer, she and her friend, Valerie Akinyi, another student at Andrews, educated others about assault. They posted content, hosted presentations, and carried out question-and-answer sessions on Instagram Live. She explains, “We both cared about this issue a lot, and we wanted to get the conversation going.”

During her sophomore year, Caryn served as co-president of the WEAAU. She and Valerie joined forces again in April to do a month-long educational series on sexual assault, inviting women from different academic fields to speak on the issue. “We had different professors bring in their expertise, and we ended the month with a panel discussion with a few professors who talked about sexual assault and how we can go about changing things,” she recalls.

This provided the launching point for the main event that Caryn’s team planned for the 2021–2022 school year. Now president of the club, she began brainstorming ideas for Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month at the beginning of the school year. Inspiration struck when then graduate student Kalli Fuller shared the concept behind “Take Back the Night.” Caryn elaborates, “It was this nationwide, on-campus march that started in the ’90s. It was this idea that, as women, we are scared to walk out at night because of that fear and looming threat of being sexually assaulted. The idea is that you’re taking back the night for yourself, as a woman.”

Caryn loved the idea immediately. She and the WEAAU team collaborated with the Pre-Law Society, School of Social Work, Office of University Culture & Inclusion, Campus Safety, the University’s Title IX representatives as well as the Andrews audiovisual team to create their biggest event yet, “Take Back the Night.” It involved a march on April 2 that started with a gathering

Her goal of women’s empowerment echoes this message of love, support and strength. She expresses, “My advice for people who really do care is to look into it, educate yourself . . . and find small things to be plugged into.”

at the globe and ended at Newbold Auditorium in Buller Hall, where a brief program showcased solidarity for survivors of sexual assault. An art exhibit displayed a variety of work by Andrews students, including paintings, songs, collages, poetry and immersive art. The club also invited representatives from the Counseling & Testing Center, University Wellness and the Center for Faith Engagement to provide support and conversation at a Solidarity Wall just outside the Campus Center, where individuals could leave messages of encouragement for survivors of sexual assault.

“It’s important to talk about sexual assault because, as Adventists, we’re not exempt from this issue by any means. This is a topic I’ve been really passionate about since high school,” Caryn asserts. “Every single time I talk about this with someone, most of the girls and some guys that I’m talking to one-on-one end up telling me a story about their experience. Sometimes they’ve never told anyone before. Sometimes they don’t even [realize].” Although her goal has never been to solicit personal stories of abuse, she has been saddened to see just how common experiences of sexual assault are. “This is a really neglected area for us in the church. We don’t touch it, we don’t talk about it, and we just started talking about it as a society, during the Me Too movement era. . . . I think that’s why I’m really passionate about how we can do something about this.”

At the awareness event, Caryn and some of the other organizers had the opportunity to speak with a group of Andrews administrators and staff who attended. Together, they talked about related campus policies, culture and safety. By the end of the conversation, Caryn found the obvious care demonstrated by those involved to be deeply encouraging. She valued the University’s conscientious support throughout the evening.

Following the Take Back the Night event, Caryn continued to cultivate positive change through the rest of her term as president. In addition to fostering connection and support for women at Andrews, she made it a priority for the club “to empower others who aren’t on this campus.” Throughout the year, WEAAU collaborated with the nonprofit organization, Empowering Her, to provide resources for women in the surrounding Berrien Springs and Benton Harbor communities.

“I’ve learned so much about how to be a leader,” Caryn expresses. Throughout her term, she deliberately fostered a democratic organization and worked closely with her fellow officers to plan events. Some of her favorite moments involved bonding with her team, and she looks forward to the great things that the club will accomplish in the future, even after she graduates. She affirms, “I hope they’re able to carry on the legacy of women’s empowerment and do more than what I could have accomplished.”

Caryn is set to finish her senior year during fall semester 2022 and graduate in the spring. She plans to return to Arizona to attend law school, preparing to become a sex crimes prosecutor. One of her main goals, once she is more established, is to open doors for conversation about sexual assault both within the church and society as a whole. She explains, “I want to be way more involved in my local church in some sort of ministry that deals with this . . . where we can talk about, in a safe space, feminism and women’s issues and women’s empowerment so we’re not leaving young girls up for the world to teach them.”

Caryn hopes to challenge the church to talk about these issues and make the changes necessary to address them. She envisions a space in which academic and educational communication can take place while still being grounded in the Bible. In her personal experience with Scripture, she has seen countless examples of Jesus empowering women, all stemming from a place of love. Her goal of women’s empowerment echoes this message of love, support and strength. She expresses, “My advice for people who really do care is to look into it, educate yourself . . . and find small things to be plugged into.”

As she pursues her passions and dreams, Caryn grounds herself in her favorite Bible passage, Philippians 4:6–7, which states, *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God.* The message has taught her to trust God with all things, especially when they are difficult. As Caryn continues to advocate for others, using her voice and her skills to change the world, her trust will remain in Him. ■

Isabella Koh, University Communication student writer



◀ Caryn Cruz represented WCAAU in Andrews University's Clubs & Organizations Ice Cream Fair.