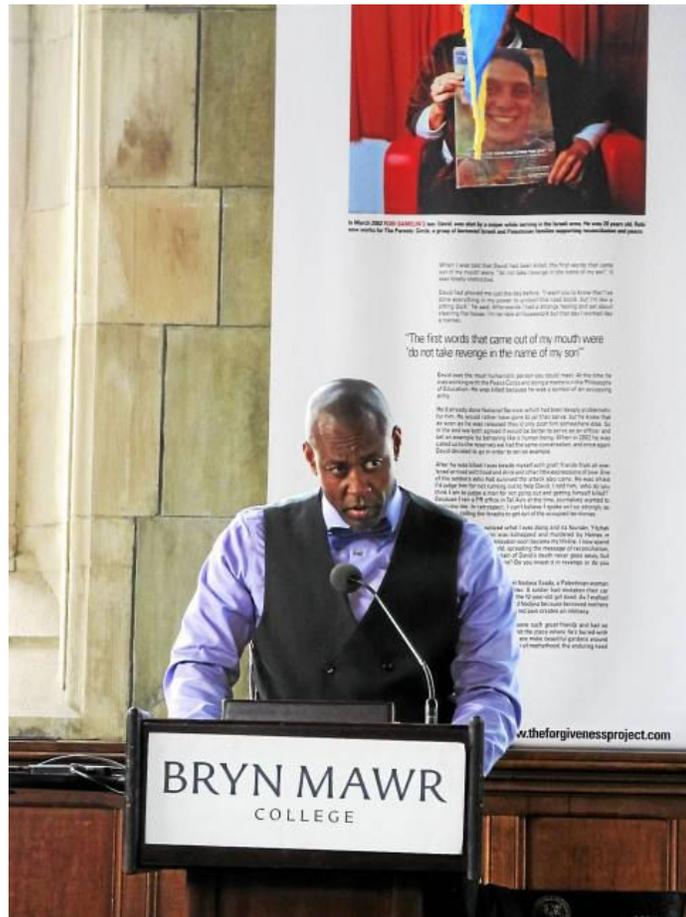


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Forgiveness theme of Bryn Mawr College conference

By Zubin Hill For Main Line Media News May 10, 2017 Updated May 10, 2017



Forgiveness was at the fore of the first-ever conference by the Bryn Mawr School of Social Work’s Social Justice Initiative. The conference, held at Bryn Mawr College May 4, was entitled, Practicing the Science and Art of Forgiveness: Beginning a Transformative Journey. The event

featured a panel discussion given by Everett Worthington, a professor of psychology at the Virginia Commonwealth University; Dorothy Johnson-Speight, the executive director of the advocacy group Mothers in Charge; and Ulysses Slaughter, an author and public speaker. It also included afternoon breakout sessions hosted by notables like Blanche Carney, the commissioner of the Philadelphia Department of Prisons.

Each panel speaker focused on a different theme. The first panel speaker, Everett Worthington, spoke on the personal impacts of forgiveness in a PowerPoint presentation called, "Forgiving yourself and others for better health."

"Research is human stories with the tears wiped dry," Worthington said. "Numbers really tell a lot about personal stories."

In an example of the personal stories behind research, Worthington continued with a brief history of the invention of anesthesia. He shared that, due to confusion about the true inventor of anesthesia, the proposed inventors held vendettas against each other. Their inability to forgive or reconcile led to personal pain, suicide for one and a heart attack for another.

"Anesthesia, meant to bring peace to suffering people, led to unforgiveness and death to these discoverers. Their ego wounds begat unforgiveness, stress and no personal peace," Worthington wrote on his presentation slides.

"Unforgiveness is stressful...it affects pretty much every system in [the] body," he explained, saying that it has been found to cause high blood pressure, decreased immune system functioning, and mental health problems.

Dorothy Johnson-Speight spoke on the theme of interpersonal forgiveness. Johnson-Speight said that she began her nonprofit Mothers in Charge, which supports mothers and families that have been affected by violence, due to her own personal hardship.

When her only son, Khaaliq Jabbar Johnson, was shot and killed on Dec. 6, 2001, Johnson-Speight said that it was difficult for her to forgive the young man who took his life. Mothers in Charge was her answer to that struggle.

Johnson-Speight recognizes the difficulty of forgiving, saying, "to forgive or not to forgive, that's the question that many of the mothers that I work with are struggling with."

The final panel speaker, Ulysses "Butch" Slaughter, spoke on community-oriented forgiveness.

"I want to speak to you as a witness," Slaughter said.

On June 25, 1978, Slaughter heard his parents fighting. And then he heard two gunshots. He saw his mother's body lying on the ground when his father came into his room to speak to him. His father had killed his mother.

Slaughter was 12 years old at the time but he said that he became the chief witness in his father's trial.

"The day my mother was shot was the logical progression of what I had seen for the last 5 years," he said. But Slaughter said his age damaged his credibility as a witness, leading to his father serving under four years in prison.

It would be 32 years before Slaughter would see his father again. During the intervening years, Slaughter said he struggled with the idea of forgiveness and justice.

"Justice is extremely intimate...it's something that you live, not something that you talk about," Slaughter said. "Forgiveness is the human art of integrating injuries for optimal innovation and harmony...[but it] takes a lot of courage."

Events came to a head for him on Dec. 19, 2010 when Slaughter learned that his father had plagiarized his testimony during his official appeal.

"I decided that I was going to kill my father." Slaughter said.

But Slaughter did not kill his father. Instead, he made his father agree to attend domestic violence training with him. After his father agreed, Slaughter said he called everyone he could think of — Dr. Phil, Oprah — to tell his story.

He said that the support and encouragement he received from others ultimately helped him in forgiving his father. "We have a choice: We can be apathetic or we can be empathetic. We can be bitter or we can be better," said Slaughter. "There needs to be a critical mass of people who are talking about forgiveness...so that it'll catch fire."

After the conference, Darlyne Bailey, founder of the Social Justice Initiative and dean at the Bryn Mawr School of Social Work, said, "The conference is actually the launch of a dream."

Bailey explained her goals for the conference. "I feel like it's my responsibility to lead others and

to learn from others about what is real social justice, not just the words but what does it mean to really create — together — a society where everyone knows they're valued and valuable," Bailey said. "The conference is purposefully focusing on forgiveness as one pathway to getting to that end."