

Gold Medalist Kayla Harrison Discussed Women’s Empowerment

By: Zachary Good, Alexandra Cousteau Environment and Global Climate Change Fellow

Audience members who came to watch a presentation on women’s empowerment by two-time Olympic judo gold medalist Kayla Harrison likely got more they bargained for. As Harrison introduced herself and her sport, she suggested the crowd might understand better by seeing it. A volunteer approached the stage as she explained that judo enables her to do what she loves, “throw and choke people.” Just in front of the stage in the Cape Florida Ballroom, with the help of the now-seemingly-disconcerted volunteer, Harrison demonstrated what that meant.



The March 21 event, co-hosted by the Global Perspectives Office and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, was a feature of Women’s History Month. Harrison’s presentation was titled, “Empowering Women: Persistence and Overcoming Obstacles.” Her story reflects that theme in more than one way.

Harrison began practicing judo at the age of six, and she said she immediately enjoyed “the bowing, the culture and getting to throw guys around.” She pointed out that it was years before she ever won her first match. She credited her determination to improve as her foundation for success. As she began winning more and more, Harrison described that she withdrew from society having “no confidence, self-esteem or hope.” At the age of 16, she confessed to her mother that her coach had been sexually abusing her for some time. Jumping to action, her mom filed charges against the coach and moved Harrison to Wakefield, Massachusetts, to train with two-time Olympic bronze medalist Jimmy Pedro and his father Big Jim.

Amidst the personal turmoil of facing her former coach in court, Harrison described winning the judo U.S. open. She said she was resolved to quit. Big Jim convinced her not to let her past define her future, and to align herself with clear goals. Harrison emphasized the power of goals over

dreams, and of positive visualization. She went on to win multiple world judo championships, as well as gold medals at the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games – a first for any American.

Moving on from her judo career, Harrison founded a non-profit organization, the Fearless Foundation, which seeks to bring awareness to child sexual abuse and provide a place where survivors “can thrive.” She is also working on an educational book, with the goal of implementing it in middle school classrooms across the country.

During a question and answer period, an audience member asked Harrison what was next for her. She responded that she plans to pursue a career in mixed martial arts, following in the footsteps of her former training partner Ronda Rousey. She said she also plans on expanding her foundation and doing her part to change the world as a voice in the realm of child sexual abuse. When asked what could be done to elevate women’s sports, Harrison noted that she has already seen some progress in the sport of judo. She also offered that families need to encourage young girls to play sports, men need to serve as allies and society as a whole must work together to empower women.

After the event, Harrison posed for a friendly picture with her audience volunteer and her two gold medals.

