

# “My Whole World Shifted”

## *The Pledge Season 2 - Episode 6*

*A quick note--parts of this episode include sounds of violence that may be triggering, and reactions to that violence that contain strong language.*

Kathryn: You can't ignore Nazis. Right? You can't ignore the KKK. That they are, in fact, gathering in strength, that they have been ignored. It's been going on and it has been ignored. And that when they show up. It is incumbent on people who have privilege, right? People who have white bodies, to stand up and say, this isn't okay. And to put ourselves between these forces of evil, essentially, and everyone else.

Allison: This is The Pledge, a podcast profiling people who have pledged to engage in our democracy. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman. In this episode, we're going to Charlottesville, Virginia to find out what it felt like to be there during the summer of 2017.

*Background chant: “You will not replace us”*

Allison: That's the summer when hundreds of white supremacists came to protest the plan to remove the statue of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee. One of the white supremacists drove a car into a crowd injuring many and killing Heather Heyer.

In this episode, we're changing things up a little. We will explore activism in Charlottesville through the stories of three women. Each has a unique perspective, but they all were dramatically affected by the events of that summer two years ago. They are, Kathryn Laughon, who is white; Althea Laughon-Worrell, Kathryn's biracial daughter; and Miss Katrina Turner, who is black.

For Kathryn Laughon, the story starts on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, a little more than a month before the infamous White Supremacist rally. At that time, Kathryn was reconciling mixed messages about what to do when confronted with hate groups like the KKK.

Kathryn: When I go back in time, places that I trusted as organizations who are sort of leaders and thinking about civil rights, their guidance was not to show up in these spaces. Not to show up to confront Nazis, not to show up to confront the KKK. That the better option was to not give them oxygen, not give them attention. And I'm sure you've

heard this, hold events somewhere else. You know, tra la la. We're here being peaceful. We are ignoring you.

Allison: This sounds familiar to me and raises such an interesting conundrum. Do we risk strengthening white supremacists when we fight back, because we give them more attention? Or is this just a way to bury our heads in the sand and pretend it's going to go away, leaving their hateful messages unchallenged? Kathryn started listening activist leaders in Charlottesville who didn't believe in the philosophy of keeping your distance. So she showed up on July 8th.

Kathryn: And the idea was we were going to leave this church and head downtown and surround the park where the KKK would be, and we would drown them out with our voices. I thought, well, OK, all right. This feels like sort of traditional protest march. This makes sense to me.

*Sirens, protest sounds*

Allison: But, it turned out to be more than a traditional protest march.

Kathryn: The police presence was overwhelming and the helicopter noise. We are literally singing this little light of mine, Right? And our little light is not shining because this helicopter is just, it's all you can hear. That's it. Helicopters.

Allison: Then the KKK showed up.

Kathryn: It was totally a pathetic band of pitiful people holding signs that were so, virulently anti-Semitic and racist. So it was like this combination of, just they're pitiful, we should ignore them, and I can't believe I'm seeing this.. I can't believe they're marching in public. They had the hats in this whole thing, swastikas.

Allison: They were proudly, publicly expressing their hate for Blacks and Jews.

Kathryn: And then, at the end of it, they left, they were escorted by the police. Escorted by the police who were lined up to protect them from us. Which makes no sense to me. None whatsoever. And then we were tear gassed. Because when the when when the KKK left, it was declared an unlawful assembly, we were declared, the anti-racist, anti-fascist protesters were declared an unlawful assembly. It was like watching a documentary, except it was in real life.

*Protest and police sounds*

Allison: An independent review found shortcomings in police training and coordination. Officers started to improvise, and mostly focused on protecting the Klan members, who were vastly outnumbered by the counter-protestors. But Kathryn saw herself as a peaceful protester of hateful speech. She will never forget what it felt like to be treated as a threat by the police. It terrified her.

Kathryn started worrying about what was going to happen on August 12 when a much bigger white supremacist rally was planned.

Kathryn: Boy, a switch flipped on that day. I came home from downtown and walked in the door and said August 12<sup>th</sup> is going to be a shit show.

*Music*

Allison: I went to Charlottesville because my friend, Lisa Drake, who lives there, wrote to me right after The Pledge launched and said I had to come and tell the stories of people taking action there. I'm so glad she did, because seeing the repercussions of that terrible day makes it so much clearer how destructive it was. I arrived the week after the two-year anniversary of the August 12<sup>th</sup> white supremacist rally. Lisa took me on a tour. We went to 4th street, where the car drove into the crowd and killed Heather Heyer. We also saw a mural celebrating 120 of the activists still fighting to confront the legacy of racism and white supremacy. There were large black and white photographs of the activists, with determined, strong, expressions, spread out, like patchwork, along the side of the building. The three women in this episode were all featured on the mural.

*Music*

Allison: Although the big rally was scheduled for August 12<sup>th</sup>, trouble actually started the night before. There was a service at St. Paul's Memorial Church on the University of Virginia campus, not far from the statue of Robert E. Lee that everyone was fighting about. Kathryn remembers that it was packed.

Kathryn: It was dangerously full. It was full. No fire marshall in the world was o.k. with how many people were in that church.

Allison: Kathryn had been worrying about what would happen ever since her experience at the Klan rally the previous month. Before they left the house, she brought her family together.

Kathryn: And said, “hey, why don't we all...” because Althea’s brother didn’t come with us. I said, “Why don’t we all have this cake? And I was very deliberate. I don't even know if they know that. That I was like, we need a moment as a family...I'm sorry...

Allison: Her tears come suddenly. We had actually been talking for quite a while, but remembering this moment seemed to bring the fear right back.

Kathryn: So we had this little moment and then we went to the church, And it was quite a service that got preached. You know, Cornel West and Tracy Blackmon, and...

*Tracey Blackmon (preaching): As a little girl in Birmingham Alabama I can still remember standing on the street, on the sidewalk, and watching the Klan rally go by.*

Allison: Here’s Reverend Traci Blackmon that night.

*Tracey Blackmon (preaching): I can see it in my mind’s eye.*

Allison: As Kathryn and her family sat riveted inside the church, she saw on her Twitter feed what was happening outside. White supremacists holding tiki torches were marching all around them chanting Nazi slogans, like “blood and soil.”

*chanting outside “Blood and soil, blood and soil...”*

Allison: There were hundreds of them.

Kathryn: I don’t even know how to talk about being in that church. it was surreal. It was surreal because the service ended but we were surrounded by Nazis. And we couldn’t leave. And so they just kept singing.

*Sounds of singing in church*

Allison: This was the first thing Kathryn’s daughter, Althea, described, when I asked her about that August weekend. She remembers how scared she was. She was sitting in that church with her white mother and black father.

Althea: After it was over, we had to stay inside the church, and we had to leave quietly and in small groups. And it was terrifying. I present very white to the world. I'm mixed. I'm black and I'm white, and I'm also gay. And you may not know these things looking at me. But it was still terrifying because my large black father was in that church with us.

We had to run to our cars to try and stay away from these people because they were going to attack us.

*Music*

Allison: The third activist I talked to was also in the church that evening. Katrina Turner, known as Miss Katrina. She is still outraged at what the white supremacists got away with.

Katrina: With the torches and everything they did Friday night, they were still allowed to come and try to have that rally. Saturday morning, after everything they did. And then, somebody died. Somebody died because they wouldn't listen to us. Those people said they were coming to hurt us.

Allison: Miss Katrina's criticism of the police started long before this weekend. One of her sons was arrested in April of 2016 after *he* had called 911. She explains that he was calling for help, but then he was the one that got arrested. She's filed several complaints since. The events in the summer of 2017 just add to Miss Katrina's anger with the Charlottesville Police Department.

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, Miss Katrina marched with that son. You might have seen the footage of the car barreling into the counter-protestors. Miss Katrina and her son were part of that group. A young white supremacist, who had driven from Ohio to attend the rally, deliberately drove his car into the crowd. He hit and killed Heather Heyer, a 32-year-old white Charlottesville woman who was there to protest the hate rally.

Miss Katrina's son barely missed getting hit. Her son had also been among those warning city officials about what could happen if the rally went ahead.

Katrina: He said, we told y'all don't come, we told y'all don't come, we came to City Council. He just went off about how we told them not to let these people come to this city. And now look.

Allison: You actually see him in the footage Spike Lee uses at the very end of his movie *BlackkKlansman*. I'll share that audio with you now, but I want to warn you again that it's upsetting.

*Movie sound.*

Allison: In the aftermath of the Charlottesville rally, the shock, grief and anger over Heather Heyer's death dominated coverage of what had happened, understandably so. But

because Heather was a white woman, it had the strange effect of distorting what the whole thing had been about.

Katrina: They have lost what that day was really about. After Heather died, that's all it's been about. But that day we marched for equal justice for black people. We marched because we can't even walk the streets sometimes without the police stopping us. Or we can't drive without the police coming behind us. Or go in the store, So we marched for our equality,

Allison: Miss Katrina is in no way minimizing the enormous loss of Heather Heyer. She just knows how crucial it is to focus on the fight that still needs to be fought.

Katrina: And Susan, Heather's mom, she knows she knows that also, you know, because she said that.

Allison: Heather Heyer's mom is actually determined to use the platform she's been given through this tragedy to keep the focus on fighting racism.

*Susan Bro (Heather Heyer's Mother): Many Black parents lose their children. Many muslim parents lose their children. Jewish parents lose their children and nobody pays attention. Because we have this myth of the sacredness of the white female, I've been given a platform. So I'm going to use that platform to keep drawing attention back to where the issues are.*

Allison: Issues like the trauma Miss Katrina and all the other marchers are dealing with since experiencing the violence.

Katrina: We need to take the focus off of the person who passed. We need to think about there were so many more that got hurt physically. And like I said, I might not have gotten hit by that car, but I can see it every day, you know? And it's never going to go away.

Allison: Take a second and think about what Miss Katrina is saying. That feeling, that fear, is never going away. She saw a man, fueled by racist hatred, deliberately drive a car into a crowd, including her son, with the full intention of hurting them. I've witnessed hate, but nothing like that, and not targeting my loved ones. I just want to recognize this suffering, that multiplies the damage this kind of terror inflicts. And I want to admire the courage and the fortitude of the people that keep fighting anyway.

Miss Katrina explains to me that her primary strength comes from the memory of another son, who was born disabled and passed away when he was only 23. She says that because of him, she will never stop fighting for justice.

Katrina: Nothing but death will stop me. Nothing but death. And he's my strength, lord and my son up above, that's my strength. That's what keeps me going. And with him always looking, over me. I'm never gonna stop. I'm never gonna stop, ever, ever.

Allison: Just as Miss Katrina's activism is stronger now, so is that of her co-activist, Kathryn Laughn. Kathryn keeps fighting, she stays engaged and her understanding about the injustice around her keeps evolving.

Kathryn: There are things I believed that I didn't even know, I believed. Right? The privilege of being a middle class, well-educated white woman is that I felt like I could critique policing and talk about ways that policing needs to improve and know that there were inequities, and still believe that no matter what, the police would protect me. Right? And that I counted on that. Like I didn't think I ever thought about the police. I didn't think I cared about this. I didn't think it had anything to do with me. And then I stood there and watched them not protect us. And my whole world kind of shifted.

Allison: The city's independent review confirms Kathryn's memory, it is unequivocal on the failures of the police that terrible weekend.

*Music*

Allison: Like Kathryn and Miss Katrina, Althea gained a new understanding of her role in society that August weekend. Shortly afterward, she decided to join the Black Student Union at her high school.

Althea: I kind of realized that I wasn't doing enough and that I hadn't really considered myself as white or as black. And I was like, I don't do enough. And there is a black student union here and I am friends with the president and then-vice-president. And there's no reason why I shouldn't join this club no matter how white I am. And so I joined and I'm glad I did, because I got to do a lot of really good work.

Allison: At the time the Black Student Union was led by Zyahna Bryant, a remarkable young African American woman who started the original petition to have the Robert E. Lee statue removed in Charlottesville. It was that effort that prompted white supremacists to schedule their hate rally. Zyahna has since been featured in national media and continues to be an influential organizer. She, and the other members of the Black Student Union, introduced Althea to organizing. Now, Althea's all in.

Althea: And I am a foot soldier in something that is bigger than me and is more important than me. And activism for me personally, it's a lot about the work that you can do and the

work that you have to do. And it's about constantly adapting and changing and educating yourself, because there is always more that you can learn.

Allison: Althea is primed to begin a new journey.

Althea: I have not done anything on a scale to which I think can make big waves, and I would like to become a person who can and will do things on a large scale.

*Music*

Allison: Three women, each finding a new sense of mission and purpose on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Each evolving, and continuing to fight for social justice. Something Kathryn said lingered with me - that activists can't always tell what their impact will be while they're doing it, but when we take action we're like drops in this river that carry us forward and make the change we seek.

As for Charlottesville, itself, the name of the park where the Lee statue stands has been changed twice. After the rallies, the City Council voted unanimously to change its name to Emancipation Park, and had the statue of Robert E. Lee shrouded in black plastic. A judge ordered the shroud to be removed in February 2018, and the Council voted to change the name of the park yet again, to Market Street Park, in August 2018. The statue still stands.

*Music*

If you are moved to help the survivors from that weekend, you can find links to two Charlottesville groups where you can send donations. Go to [thepledgepodast.com](http://thepledgepodast.com) and check out the show notes. I'll also post some additional resources about Charlottesville including the independent review of the events of that summer. It's goes into much more detail than I've been able to here.

*Music*

Allison: Our next episode is the final episode of Season 2, and we're going to warm things up with some soup.



*Activist: There's something that comes from making food and sharing food that is, you know, just feels very primal and very loving. For me, I just feel that that's what affects change.*

Allison: We will meet a dedicated group of chef-activists who have created a new recipe for change in Virginia, without ever leaving their home state of Vermont. Their solution is inspiring, and delicious.

Thanks so much to Kathryn, Althea, and Miss Katrina for generously sharing with me what happened in 2017 and the brave work they've done since.

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Until next time, Stay Strong and Stick with your pledge.