



Former WNBA player Chamique Holdsclaw gives powerful testimony on asking for help



Former WNBA player Chamique Holdsclaw gives a keynote speech on mental health, Monday, Sept. 14, 2026, in Storrs, Connecticut. Holdsclaw discussed the challenges she overcame throughout her childhood and career, headlining the first of many SUBOG sponsored events dedicated to Suicide Awareness Month.

PHOTOGRAPH BY COLIN MITCHELL, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

by Manya Trivedi
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
SHE/HER/HERS
manya.trivedi@uconn.edu

The Student Union Board of Governors (SUBOG) began suicide prevention week with a powerful speech from Chamique Holdsclaw, who spoke about her battles with mental health, and how important it is to speak up and ask for help.

Holdsclaw is an Olympic Gold Medalist, Hall of Fame Inductee, three-time NCAA Champion and was the first pick in the 1999 WNBA draft.

Holdsclaw told the UConn community that returning to Storrs was its own kind of challenge. It had been nearly ten years since she last spoke on campus, and she noted the anniversary caught her off guard. This led her to spend the morning before the event reflecting on who she was the first time she walked through campus and how much had changed since.

Holdsclaw grew up in Astoria, Queens, New York. Both of her parents struggled with alcoholism and she and her younger brother were eventually raised by their grandmother.

She described the night that changed her childhood — her mother never came home, her father had been drinking and she was locked out of her

apartment. Police found her father passed out on the couch with food on the stove and took her and her brother to the police station. Adults she had never met asked her invasive questions about what happened in her home even though she felt like she had grown up in a loving environment, Holdsclaw said.

“When you’re young, we don’t have the language to say what we’re feeling,” Holdsclaw said.

Holdsclaw said that she, like many kids, adapted. She learned to make her brother soup, to take money from her mother’s purse and walk downstairs for sandwiches — to keep moving.

Basketball was where she found clarity. The court had structure, an objective, boundaries and it was hers, she said. Eventually, she convinced herself that her success in the sport meant she should not be struggling at all.

At the University of Tennessee, Holdsclaw won three consecutive national championships. She had teammates who cared about her, coaches who supported her and a game she loved. And after one of those wins, she went back to her room, sat in the quiet and could not breathe.

She asked herself the question that kept her from getting help: What do I have to be unhappy

about?

At 19 years old, Holdsclaw took the fact that her life looked good as proof that her feelings were illegitimate, she said. It took her years to learn that both things could be true at once — that a person can be successful and still be anxious or surrounded by people and still lonely.

A college coach eventually connected her to a therapist. Holdsclaw made clear that she still values the toughness she was raised with, but said her coach helped her see the distinction that mattered: there is a difference between pushing through adversity and ignoring an issue that needs attention.

Much of the second half of her speech was practical.

Holdsclaw pointed out how automatic “I’m good” has become — almost like a reflex. Two people exchange the phrase and walk away, and neither one has really said anything. Sometimes, she said, people say it because they do not want to worry anyone and sometimes they do not have words for what is happening yet.

Holdsclaw urged students to learn about campus resources, so they can point a struggling friend toward professional help.

“Listen, tell them you care and encourage them to talk to a professional, but do not try to become

their therapist,” Holdsclaw said.

Holdsclaw warned students about measuring themselves against everyone else’s internships, relationships and travel.

She said a little competitiveness is healthy, but it is important to be cautious of these feelings becoming harmful.

She also pushed the audience to think about access. Holdsclaw described waiting lists for professional help that stretch for months, insurance that does not cover care and the shortage of providers who share a patient’s language or background. She recalled living in Indianapolis and seeing intake materials offered in several languages for the city’s ethnic community, a detail she said stuck with her as a model of what equity looks like.

Near the end, Holdsclaw asked the audience to sit with one question without answering it out loud.

How are they really doing? Not their GPA, not what they are posting, or can report back to their families.

For SUBOG, bringing Holdsclaw’s message to campus in the first weeks of the semester is essential.

“We are part of Suicide Prevention Week every year,” SUBOG President Julia Pfeifer said. “It’s something we have made a tradition and we also love it. We think it is very important for the students to know, especially in the beginning of the semester, mental health is a priority and to be successful, you need to have good mental health.”

Pfeifer said Holdsclaw’s resume relates to a school where Division I athletics are central to campus identity.

“When we bring in these speakers, they really do bring a different point of view,” Pfeifer said. “With today’s speaker, she was a WNBA athlete, all

star, All-American, Hall of Famer. Us being an athletic school and having so many D-1 sports, I think seeing that perspective definitely brought something new to the students — so they could also see how mental health shows in different ways.”

SUBOG organized the event with UConn Student Health and Wellness (SHaW), where mental health resources are available.

“We talked with Kristina Stevens over there, and she does a great job,” Pfeifer said. “I think SHaW is great because they have amazing resources to help you overcome anything.”

Stevens is SHaW’s director of mental health, and she urged students to ask for help and seek the countless resources they have when they need it.

She also named the Dean of Students’ Office for mental health needs and said SUBOG itself functions as a resource of a different kind.

“I think SUBOG is a great resource if you are looking for the community, the inclusivity,” Pfeifer said. “I came to UConn with no friends, and I joined SUBOG, and I had that instant connection with the community.”

Holdsclaw rounded out her talk by telling students to leave Storrs with real friendships, people who will still be around in 20 years and people who will go get ice cream with them when things are hard.

She ended her speech with something she wanted to emphasize to students: There is a difference between failing at something and being a failure. Something will not go according to plan: a class, a job, a relationship. When you are young, failure can feel like the end of everything. It is not.



Chamique Holdsclaw in 1999 after being drafted into the Washington Mystics WNBA Team.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @WNBA ON INSTAGRAM