

America's Clown Princess

CAROL BURNETT RECEIVES THE LEGEND AWARD
FOR ACHIEVEMENTS AND ALL SHE HAS GIVEN BACK

BY ALEX
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CAROL BURNETT might have become a journalist if UCLA had a journalism department when she was a freshman in the 1940s.

"If they'd had a major in journalism," Burnett said, "I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you now. I would have majored in journalism."

Instead, she fell in love with performing and became a world-renowned comedienne, actress, singer, author and philanthropist, and the first woman to be the solo star of a major TV network primetime comedy-variety series.

Tonight, Burnett is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Legend Award for Lifetime Achievement. It recognizes not only her roles in entertainment, but also her contributions to society, on both an artistic and humanistic level.

Burnett gives back in many ways. She provides scholarships for promising actors at UCLA, donates to Sundance to support emerging filmmakers and contributes to Stephen Sondheim's

new playwright organization.

Her top charities include the Hereditary Disease Foundation, which does scientific research.

She likes to repay those who gave her a chance. Her mentors included '50s TV host Gary Moore and another funny redhead, Lucille Ball, who became Burnett's great friend.

Now Burnett is a mentor and role model to a newer generation.

When Burnett received the first-ever Peabody Awards life achievement honor earlier this year, the group's executive director Jeffrey P. Jones said, "There would be no Gilda Radner, Julia Louis-Dreyfus or Tina Fey without her blazing the trail."

"The Carol Burnett Show" was a hit on CBS for 11 seasons, and averaged 30 million viewers a week. Yet in 1979 Burnett walked away from her hit show, as she put it, before being told to leave.

She has continued making award-winning TV specials with Julie Andrews, Beverly Sills

As Miss Hannigan
in *Annie*, with
Albert Finney.





Above: Her signature Tarzan cry was a regular feature of her show although one night, she had a malfunction and lost it; Cinderella trying to recall her big night on the "Garry Moore Show".

Far left: *closer* magazine had a cover story about how she and Vicki Lawrence met.

Left: Playing Norma Desmond with Tim Conway and Harvey Korman.



Clockwise from above: Mrs. Wiggins, the secretary to Tim Conway's Mr. Tudwell; The Bob Mackie-designed curtain rod dress in "Went With the Wind" is on display in the Smithsonian; Good friend, Lucille Ball, appeared on her show.

Opposite page: Mama, portrayed by Vicki Lawrence clashes with Burnett's character, Eunice.

and others, starring in movies including *Annie*, doing frequent guest spots on TV, performing on Broadway and giving lectures nationwide.

Through the years, Burnett never forgot her love of journalism, as she demonstrated in the 1980s after winning a bruising five-year libel battle with the *National Enquirer*.

Her lawyers proved the notorious tabloid published an erroneous, malicious article about Burnett and Henry Kissinger.

"When I won the *Enquirer* suit," recalls Burnett, "I just donated all the money to journalism schools—one in Berkeley and one at the University of Hawaii. I did it because of my interest in journalism. That's what I wanted."

Even more important to Burnett was the precedent it struck.

"The *Enquirer* used to claim they were a newspaper," explained Burnett, "which was their excuse for not carefully checking their facts."

"Then it was ruled by the judge who said, 'No, it's not a newspaper. It's a magazine and they have time to check their facts.' They weren't happy about that. So now it's a magazine, which I'm very proud of."

Burnett didn't start at the top. She rose from poverty and a broken home. When she made it, she took care of her family, raised three daughters, married three times, and has two grandsons.

She also lived through any parent's worst nightmare with her eldest daughter, Carrie Hamilton—twice.

First, when Carrie was in her teens, she went from an A to an F student because of drug addiction. She entered rehab three times before recovering.

When her story started to leak out, Burnett feared what the *Enquirer* and tabloid "rags" might write.



Burnett recalls, "We had a family powwow and said we must come out with this before the *Enquirer* does one of those terrible things, making up a lot of stuff about Carrie."

They went to *People* magazine, which put Carol and Carrie on the cover.

"We were the first to do it, but it came out of self-preservation," said Burnett. "To tell our story and tell the truth."

Carrie and Carol, together and separately, went on TV, made public appearances, visited schools and more to share their experience and warn about the danger of drugs. They helped millions.

Carrie went on to become a successful actress, singer, Broadway star, writer, playwright and more.

The second tragedy for Burnett was that her daughter, after winning her fight against drug abuse, lost her battle against cancer. Carrie passed away at age 38.

Burnett still values every moment she had with Carrie, with whom she wrote a play and a book, and then wrote the heartfelt and wrenching *Carrie and Me*.

"The life lesson is that you can cope," said



Burnett, “and just be grateful for the time that you did know her, that she was in my life. As tragic as it is, I knew her and she was so good, and helped me cheer up so many times. That’s who she was.”

Burnett is not political, but stands firmly with the legitimate media at a time when journalism is under unprecedented attack from the American president and his followers.

“Yes, it bothers me a lot, said Burnett. “Because it’s not fair. It’s not right. All the reporters are doing are reporting and then to call them fake is ridiculous. That upsets me. One of my first loves was journalism.”

Despite her achievements and shelves of awards, Burnett is not slowing down.

“I’m still on the road. I still act. I’m at the end of 20 appearances on my ‘Laughter & Reflection’ question and answer tour,” Burnett said with a self-deprecating laugh. “I know I’m an old person but I don’t feel it inside, my goodness.”

As she moves forward, Burnett’s many talents are being re-discovered by a younger generation. They watch DVDs of her shows, and stream reruns and videos on YouTube and entire episodes daily on MeTV, a digital channel.

She says her old shows continue to delight new audiences because the humor wasn’t too topical, political or very racy.

“I was a clown and we just wanted to do funny stuff,” said Burnett.

“Now I’m getting fan mail from 10-year-olds. Teenagers write me. And so do people in their 20s and 30s who weren’t born when we did our show. I’m getting audiences now that are from young kids to people in their 90s.”

Awards matter, but for Burnett that continued interest by fans is the most important recognition of all.

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CAROL BURNETT

Legend Award for Lifetime Achievement

