

The SUCCESS of SURVIVING R. KELLY

CREATORS OF LIFETIME DOCUMENTARY SERIES RECEIVE
PRESIDENT'S AWARD FOR IMPACT ON MEDIA BY LISA RICHWINE

Allegations that musician R. Kelly was abusing teenage girls and young women were well known for years. Yet the singer continued releasing records, staging live shows and living a rock-star life.

That abruptly changed after the Lifetime channel in January 2019 aired the documentary series *Surviving R. Kelly*, in which multiple women detailed harrowing stories of sexual misconduct and abuse at the hands of the entertainer. Within weeks, the Grammy-winning artist known for the hit song "I Believe I Can Fly" was dropped by his record label and indicted for aggravated sexual assault of four people, including three teenage girls.

Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club is honoring the creative team behind *Surviving R. Kelly* with the President's Award for Impact on Media. It is being accepted by series executive producers Tamra Simmons, Brie Miranda Bryant, Jesse

Daniels, Dream Hampton and Joel Karsberg.

"The *Surviving R. Kelly* team has done what every journalist aspires to do: tell a compelling story that prompts change and that also speaks to a broader issue which needs to be addressed," LA Press Club President Chris Palmeri said.

Karsberg and Daniels, producers at Kreativ Inc., began exploring a documentary about Kelly in 2017 after *Buzzfeed* and *Rolling Stone* wrote about new allegations of abuse by Kelly. Those followed the proceedings of 2008, when the singer was tried and acquitted on child pornography charges in his hometown of Chicago. He continued selling music and drawing crowds to his concerts.

Karsberg and Daniels wondered why the stories kept emerging and yet Kelly's career kept going. They looked into various cases and started to hear similar stories that they felt established a pattern of behavior that could be

told in a documentary format.

The pair joined up with Simmons and began by reaching out to an Atlanta couple who had gone public with accusations that Kelly was holding their daughter captive in Chicago. Others began sharing similar stories, and the team

sought to use television to bring the matter to a wide audience and demonstrate a pattern of behavior, Daniels said.

"We realized that, while there has been some incredible journalism here, maybe through the power of a documentary, the power of TV, in a bigger way, we may be able to make a difference," he said.

Meanwhile, Bryant had just taken a job as senior vice president of unscripted development and programming at Lifetime, and the channel was looking to join the conversation around the burgeoning #MeToo movement against sexual harassment.

The project was pitched to Bryant, who believed it would play well on Lifetime even though the network had done few documentaries in the past.

Over two years, the team inter-



Survivors, clockwise from top left: The Clary family is trying to convince their daughter to return, Sparkle, AK, Jovante, Lizzette, and Lisa.

From far left, executive producers: Jesse Daniels, Tamra Simmons, Joel Karsberg, Brie Miranda Bryant, and Dream Hampton.





Above: The Savages were among the parents who came out to warn against R. Kelly, believing their daughter has been brainwashed into staying with him.

Clockwise, above, right: Survivors Michelle, Kitt, Faith and Jerhonda.

viewed more than 50 people, including parents who say Kelly abused their daughters, former managers and producers, an ex-wife, and others once close to the singer. Seven women said on camera that they were victims of sexual or emotional abuse by Kelly, some when they were underage. In some cases, according to the accounts, Kelly kept women from contacting family members and controlled when they could eat or use the bathroom.

The documentary also explored issues of race and criminal justice, highlighting a history where accounts from black girls or women were often dismissed, and where Kelly's fans argued he was a victim of a system biased against black men.

Surviving R. Kelly aired in six hours over three nights. It broke viewership records for Lifetime and ignited conversations on social media and at in-person screenings. Calls to sexual abuse hotlines increased.

The documentary generated coverage from news outlets around the world. Bryant said she received articles about it in Mandarin, and also heard men discussing the series and how they had been sexually abused as children.

"They said it without shame, and they were heard without judgment," Bryant said. "I have never seen anybody talk about such a topic so publicly like that. For me, that moment was extremely impactful and I realized what we were able to do by giving survivors this platform."

The series also added fuel to the social media movement #MuteRKelly, which was launched in late 2017 to pressure record companies, concert promoters and others to cut ties with the artist. In the wake of the documentary, radio stations stopped playing Kelly's music, streaming services removed his songs and the label RCA



Records dropped the singer.

In Chicago, a prosecutor called for anyone who felt they had been abused by the singer to come forward. In February, he was charged with 10 counts of sexual abuse. Kelly has pleaded not guilty and is free on bond.

"I feel like the world heard them," Simmons said of the women who told their stories.

Hampton noted that not everyone reacted the way the team had hoped. Before Kelly's music was pulled, streaming services saw a spike in interest in his songs. The day after the documentary finished airing, his songs were streamed 4.3 million times, according to Billboard.

There were other, more serious developments.

"I was early on seeing a lot of the victims were being trolled and blamed, seeing that the parents were being blamed. I saw that a lot of people were looking to blame anyone but R. Kelly," Hampton said. "I didn't expect it to be easy, and it wasn't."

Still, she said she was gratified by discussions she saw on social media, particularly among black women who were speaking up about sexual violence and fighting any suggestions that victims could be at fault. 🙏

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