



# Honoring a Voice for *Change*

TARANA BURKE, WHO LAUNCHED THE 'ME TOO' MOVEMENT, RECEIVES THE LA PRESS CLUB'S IMPACT AWARD

BY LISA RICHWINE

**T**ARANA Burke was running an after-school program when she kept hearing about rampant sexual violence against black women and girls. She pulled out a piece of paper and wrote a simple phrase: me too.

Those two words, written in 2006, guided Burke's creation of a movement to help survivors of sexual violence to heal. More than a decade later, they resonate as a rallying cry worldwide.

Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club is honoring Burke with the Impact Award, an accolade that recognizes influential contributions to culture and society.

A native of the Bronx, Burke has spent nearly 30 years promoting racial justice and gender equality, with a focus on black girls and women, through grassroots work in Alabama, Philadelphia



Burke was featured on the cover of *Hannah* magazine in 2018.

and New York. She used the phrase "me too," which she has described as offering "empowerment through empathy," to promote solidarity among survivors

and a greater awareness on the prevalence of sexual violence.

In 2017, the #MeToo hashtag went viral as a response to rape and sexual assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, and helped spark a worldwide conversation. The hashtag was used on social media more than 19 million times in the first year, according to the Pew Research Center.

"I could never have envisioned something that would change the world," Burke told NBC News in late 2017. "I was trying to change my community."

The origin of "me too" stretches back to 1997 when Burke was working at a youth camp and a 13-year-old girl named Heaven confided that she had been abused by her mother's boyfriend. Burke found herself at a loss for how to respond or help.

"I couldn't even bring myself to

whisper..." Burke said in a note on the me too organization's website.

The experience stuck with Burke and informed the action plan she created in 2006. She founded Just Be Inc., a non-profit organization focused on the overall well-being of young women of color, where she put the phrase "me too" into practice.

She also went public with her own

story of being abused as a child and teenager.

***The origin of "me too" stretches back to 1997 when Burke was working at a youth camp and a 13-year-old girl confided that she had been abused by her mother's boyfriend.***

Burke's career then moved forward to nonprofits in Philadelphia and New York.

Then, in October 2017, the *New*

From opposite page, far left: Burke speaks at the 2014 March to End Rape Culture in Philadelphia; Tarana Burke in the fifth grade; T Burke Jewels; This page: Tarana with daughter, Kaia.



*York Times* and the *New Yorker* reported detailed sexual assault allegations from multiple women who said they were abused by Weinstein. (He has denied having non-consensual sex with anyone and is scheduled to go on trial in January on charges of rape and predatory assault of two women.)

As the public reacted to the initial reports about Weinstein, actress Alyssa Milano urged anyone who had been sexually abused or assaulted to type the phrase "me too" on Twitter.

The response was enormous as mil-



A poster of "Just Be 'isms'" to encourage women to empower themselves.



Above: In 2018, Burke was one of several cover subjects for their annual 100 Most Influential People issue.

Left: In the course of her activism, Burke has met her share of notable people including President Barack Obama, Gloria Steinem and Coretta Scott King.

lions of women flooded social media around the world with stories of being abused, groped, molested and raped.

Burke was not involved in Milano's tweet, and she told the *New York Times* her first reaction was panic that the phrase would be used in a way she had not intended.

But she decided to seize the moment to amplify the idea she had been advocating for years. She spoke to audiences and the media about her vision behind the phrase and sought to put the focus on the survivors, including those outside of Hollywood.

"This is a movement about the one in four girls, and the one in six boys, who are sexually assaulted every year and carry those wounds into adulthood," Burke said in a 2018 TED Talk. "It's about the 84% of trans women who will be sexually assaulted this year, and the indigenous women who are three-and-a-half times more likely to be sexually assaulted than any other group, or people with disabilities who

are seven times more likely to be sexually abused."

"It's about the 60% of black girls like me who will be experiencing sexual violence before they turn 18, and the thousands and thousands of low-wage workers who are being sexually harassed right now on jobs they cannot afford to quit," she added.

In 2018, actress Michelle Williams invited Burke to walk the red carpet as her guest at the Golden Globe awards, a move intended to give the activist a high-profile platform to discuss her work. Burke urged Williams to broaden the effort and helped pair several activists and actresses for the event.

Since then, the accounts from women have led to changes across entertainment, media, business and government. Several high-profile men lost their powerful positions, and corporations across

industries re-evaluated sexual harassment policies.

"This is the fastest moving social change we've seen in decades and it began with individual acts of courage by hundreds of women—and some men, too—who came forward to tell their own stories," said Edward Felsenthal, editor-in-chief of *Time* magazine, which honored Burke and other "Silence Breakers" as the publication's Person of the Year in 2017.

The "me too" movement created a website that offers information for survivors about rape treatment centers, counseling and other local resources, plus toolkits for advocates who want to support the cause.

Recently, Burke has urged people to use a new hashtag—#MeToo voter—to signify to politicians that they want government policies that support survivors and accountability for sexual predators.

She also is pushing media outlets to raise the topic during the televised debates among candidates for president.

The viral spread of #MeToo "was a consciousness-stirring moment, but it's not enough to create awareness," Burke wrote in *Time* magazine. "What matters is what we do next."



TURNER **CLASSIC** MOVIES

PROUDLY CONGRATULATES

# BEN MANKIEWICZ

ON RECEIVING THE 2019 LUMINARY AWARD  
IN RECOGNITION OF HIS CAREER ACHIEVEMENT IN MEDIA

