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Meet the woman who coined 'Me Too' 10 years ago — to help women of color

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Tarana Burke was watching as #MeToo became an internet phenomenon Sunday. Soon, she started to panic. By the time celebrities were tweeting #MeToo, encouraging every woman who had survived sexual harassment or assault to do the same, Burke knew she had to do something. She didn't know where to start.

"If this grows big," she recalled thinking at the time, "this is going to completely overshadow my work."

#MeToo, the viral awareness campaign that inspired millions of posts on Facebook and Twitter, did not begin with Alyssa Milano. It didn't even begin as a response to the dozens of women who have spoken out about the alleged sexual misconduct of disgraced Hollywood producer [Harvey Weinstein](#). It did not begin in 2017.

More than a decade ago, Burke was the one who identified the power of the phrase "Me too" as one that could help women. She founded the "Me Too" movement in 2006 because she, as someone who experienced sexual assault, wanted to do something to help women and girls - particularly women and girls of color - who had also survived sexual violence. She's in the middle of working on a documentary, called "Me Too," that comes out next year.

As #MeToo exploded over the weekend, Burke saw the hope and empathy that she knew those words could inspire in the women who chose to tweet. But her experience told her that the viral hashtag could, despite its best intentions, undo much of what she'd worked to build, at a moment when there was so much more to be done.

On Sunday night, Burke began to tweet. "I had to ring the alarm," she said in an interview Wednesday. "One, before my work is erased, and two, because if I can support people, I have to do that."

"It made my heart swell to see women using this idea - one that we call 'empowerment through empathy'," she tweeted, "to not only show the world how widespread and pervasive sexual violence is, but also to let other survivors know they are not alone. #metoo."

Viral campaigns like #MeToo can work like interventions in the news cycle. This one emerged after weeks of growing accusations of sexual assault against Weinstein, and has helped to redirect a conversation about one man toward one about the women who have survived sexual harassment or sexual assault. The hashtag is

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meant for the public, a massive show of scale to prove that the issue is unavoidable. Its audience is everyone, particularly men.

Burke, with the help of Black Twitter, has staged her own intervention as #MeToo spread, with surprising success. Burke didn't have a national profile, and her #MeToo work was not well-known beyond the communities where she concentrates her activism. So those who knew Burke's work began to tweet about it.

Others pointed to other similar viral campaigns - like #WhatWereYouWearing, #YouOkSis and #SurvivorPrivilege - that were all started by women of color. By Monday, Ebony magazine had a short feature on Burke and her life's work. Other outlets soon followed, and eventually Alyssa Milano, credited in many early media stories for starting #MeToo, also directed her Twitter followers to learn about the movement that preceded the hashtag:

"I was just made aware of an earlier #MeToo movement, and the origin story is equal parts heartbreaking and inspiring" - Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa_Milano) October 16, 2017

Part of the message here is that a viral hashtag that was largely spread and amplified by white women actually has its origins in a decade of work by a woman of color. But it is also this: It will take more than a hashtag, however meaningful it has become, to do the real work that is needed now. As Burke said, "It's also people's lives. It's a very touchy private, deeply personal thing."

"Me Too" grew out of Burke's work with young girls. Burke, 44, grew up in the Bronx and has spent most of the past 25 years as an activist and organizer around the country, working to help young people in marginalized communities.

In Alabama, Burke worked at an organization that ran a youth camp. There was a girl there - Burke publicly calls her Heaven when she tells this story - who clung to her. "People would call her trouble," Burke said. "And she was trouble, because she was a survivor." Heaven was about 13 years old.

One day, Heaven wanted to talk to Burke privately. She began to tell Burke about the sexual violence she had survived. "I was not ready," Burke said. "When she disclosed, I rejected her." She sent her to someone else.

"She never came back to camp," Burke said. To this day, she doesn't know what happened to Heaven.

The guilt Burke felt became a refrain, a repeated question: "Why couldn't you just say 'me too?'"

What came next was a lot of thought - about what she had survived, what had helped her, and how that might become something meaningful she could do for others. "When I started putting the pieces together of what helped me, it was having other survivors empathize with me."

This was how "Me Too" started. In 2006, a year before the movement would get its first grant, Burke started a MySpace page for the movement she wanted to create. Neither Burke nor I could find that original

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MySpace page, but Burke remembers its effect.

"MySpace got us a lot of attention. That was surprising. Our work until then was with young people," she said, "but we had so many (adult) women respond to the MySpace page." One woman, a designer, donated 1,000 "Me Too" T-shirts. Burke still wears one of them when she speaks publicly about the movement. Another supporter made them a real website.

As interest grew, Burke realized that the need for "Me Too" was bigger than she first thought. "This is not just about our small community," she recalled thinking. "This is necessary. People are crying for it."

#MeToo, the viral hashtag, seemed to succeed almost by magic. It appeared, it spread, it brought some new meaning to an important issue, and in a week, it will no longer be news. For Burke, "Me Too" is a strategy, one that has been around before the hashtag, and one that will be there after #MeToo fades away.

"What the viral campaign did is, it creates hope. It creates inspiration," Burke said. "People need hope and inspiration desperately. But hope and inspiration are only sustained by work." One of the things that concerns Burke about the spread of #MeToo is whether those who helped to inspire women to disclose their stories of survival are prepared for what comes next.

"If I had to do it myself, we would be prepared to support people," Burke said, to emphasize "that you are not obligated to disclose," and that women seeing #MeToo fill up their timelines should feel no guilt about checking out to take care of themselves.

"I just know what happens," she said. "I've seen it so many times when women feel so emboldened all at once. There's a cycle that people go through that requires support, Even in just saying 'Me, too.'"

#MeToo has produced a kind of unity by volume, but when you speak to individual women about it, you find a wide range of responses - empowerment, exhaustion, solidarity, trauma. Burke had some advice for them.

"If you are a survivor who is feeling activated by this, there are organizations across the country that are doing this. Small organizations, local organizations," she said. "If you're compelled to do a thing, just do something," she said. Get trained to volunteer on a sexual violence hotline. Donate to a charity that supports survivors.

For those, however, who feel like they're drowning in #MeToo, Burke had this advice: "Disconnect, don't feel guilty about it. ... Do that work at your own pace. Six months from now if you want to say 'me too,' it's there. It exists forever."

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