

# BUILDING THE WORLD WE WANT TO LIVE IN THROUGH ACTIVISM



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In 1971, not too far from here up the street and around the corner, a woman was raped on Sunset Boulevard and the anti-rape movement took hold in Los Angeles. That assault was the catalyst for the founding of my organization then known as LACAAW, now known as Peace Over Violence. Simultaneously, a powerful collective unconscious spread and activists started rape crisis centers with 24-hour rape hotlines across the country. It was a heady time when the pioneering feminists started to put protests and programs together and created a movement and organizations that didn't exist before.

So here we are almost 40 years later in Hollywood, gathered at one of the largest conferences ever dedicated to exploring the issues and complexities of sexual violence on the West Coast. Much has changed but some of what was created back then is still valid and operational today. One of the original programs from that era still functioning is the LA Rape and Battering hotline which is staffed to this

day by volunteers from the diverse Los Angeles community. It has been running continuously 24/7 365 days a year for the past 39 years - going down only once during the Northridge earthquake in 1994!

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A lot has happened in 40 years, and when we gather like this it is important to know that with all the successes and setbacks and we are still here. We are a movement made up of activists, advocates, survivors and professionals. And some of us are all that rolled into one! Survivor-Activist-Professional. Maybe we

are creating a new species! The progression since the early days of this movement has been amazing. But like true activists we are never satisfied. After all we accomplish we remain restless to repair, reinvent, and prevent.

Activism is day to day—in the present. A movement is the accumulation of daily activities headed somewhere over time. We are a movement committed to making the invisible visible and taking action. There has been acceleration of our movement's work in the last decade or so. We have to acknowledge the importance of the Violence Against Women Act as critical public policy in our country and we can look forward to the International Violence Against Women Act, the IVAWA.

Recently our staff did some research on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Denim Day in LA & Denim Day USA—a sexual violence prevention education campaign. We issued a report called A Painful Truth: A Retrospective of a Decade of Sexual Violence, which examined what had surfaced and taken hold in consciousness and activism in the last decade, truths that society didn't know or didn't want to know, like:

- How many boys and girls clergy had sexually abused and how meek and pathetic institutional responses had been
- The extent to which adult men are unable to speak up or seek help about their child sexual abuse
- The hidden number of college youth sexually assaulted
- How many inmates were afraid to come forward to report sexual assaults in our jails and prisons - raped by other inmates and by prison guards

- The prevalence of teen dating violence
- The numbers of enlisted women in the US military assaulted by other members of the US military
- The extraordinary amount of people trafficked into this country for the sex industry, forced labor or domestic servitude
- How impactful DNA evidence could be as a public safety tool to prosecute and prevent sexual violence, to free the innocent, and how negligent authorities were in not testing rape evidence kits

In reviewing the history and the prevalence of sexual violence, the biggest lesson continues to be that there are unique and often isolated, access-deprived or marginalized and oppressed populations that are targets or easy prey for sexual violence. Those most at risk include young people, immigrant poor and homeless women, LGBTQ persons, individuals with disabilities, and prisoners. We must continue to deconstruct who it happens to and pay attention carefully if we are to ever diminish these crimes and traumas.

It is becoming harder and harder to ignore the pervasiveness of sexual violence and to deny that this trauma impacts every sector of our society. The painful truth is that the effects and impact of the trauma of sexual violence is everywhere.

How did we get here? We got here by exposing what has been too long in the shadows. We have created a body of knowledge and approaches; we've collected testimonies and amazing stories of recovery and courage and healing. We got here through the commitment of the advocates, activists, and professionals like you all in this room.

The brain trust in this ballroom at this conference is huge, and your hearts are even huger. We are tackling this painful truth—together. We do this by meeting the challenges, by challenging each other, by collaborating with not only the usual suspects but the unusual too, by building our own institutions or infiltrating the existing ones.

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We are a witnessing movement. We listen to the stories and we hear the trauma. We honor the stories of healing and recovery and that makes us braver today than we were yesterday.

We are a tough movement. It has been said that working to prevent violence is not a sprint—it's a marathon! We sometimes are too tough on each other, impatient and prickly about political correctness. And it's easy for us to want everyone else to change, for the culture to change and we forget that change starts with us. We sometimes get stuck. Some miss what used to be, but someone told me something I've never forgotten in reference to the good ole days—look back, but don't stare!

We are a busy movement. We are constantly struggling to keep our organizations going, staffing those hotlines and developing curricula, and making new programs and seeking funding and donors, meeting deadlines, volunteering, and, launching prevention campaigns building relationships with policy makers and the list goes on...and everybody is trying to catch up or stay current with technology. If one more person asks me if I twitter or tweet, I am going to scream!

We are a media movement, and we have learned how to push back and to use the media for education and to tell the stories that must be told. We have enlisted the storytellers to report and to dramatize the issue. As a community, we are provoked and challenged by the teachable and learnable moments that current events provide. The Chris Brown/Rihanna assault is an opportunity for youth to be challenged about their attitudes and beliefs regarding dating

violence and healthy relationships. It was like a wake up call for young people who didn't want to believe that their music idols could have violence in their relationship. And adults had an uncomfortable window on how youth process this kind of information. We were quite critical—as if they are not entitled to their own process or their own developmental way. And we all know how challeng-

ing it was for so many to believe that Kobe Bryant could have been a sexual abuser. The story of the full suffering of the victim in that scenario after she came forward and reported has yet to be told.

None of us can escape being challenged by stories that unfold in the public eye. We often find that there is more depth and complexities than we think. The Roman Polanski re-arrest for a sexual crime committed over 30 years ago has been a huge challenge in understanding what happened and how justice should move forward. These national conversations are ones that we are all involved in and it is important that we explore our preconceived ideas and talk to each other. Notice I said talk not yell... Unless you work for Fox television and are paid by Rupert Murdoch. These national conversations really do burst the secrecy bubble and hold up a mirror that often provide opportunities for people to liberate themselves from myths and stereotypes and for our violence prevention movement to progress.

So if the movement is alive and well (I know there is a subtle humming discourse that goes on about whether we are a movement anymore) and the movement continues to be different and thrive in myriad ways, the movement needs to and keeps changing. So the question I ask myself is: what kind of movement do we want to be, going forward, over the next 40 to 50 years? We need to do strategic planning, not 5 year, but 50 year plans. Remember the marathon.

I will give you a window into what MY movement would look like, going forward. First the name. I might call it “the movement to end violence against women and girls and all sentient beings.” Anyone can join, everyone’s invited; there are no enemies in my movement. Every size shape, age, mixture, gender, bender, color, shade, profession are welcomed. Vegan is ok too. And in my movement, men would be whole-heartedly welcome, women would trust that their power would not be taken away—neither would

they give it away. Power sharing would be the norm. Men would be more than allies; they would become partners.

In my movement there would be lots of youth and young people for the simple reason that the batons must be passed and young folks have a lot of invention and fresh intention.

In my movement, all women and girls would be encouraged to train in women’s self-defense and empowerment and to be in charge of their own safety and autonomy.

In my movement, there would be lots of different kinds of music – afro cuban, Yiddish rap, pop salsa, reggae punk, Miles Davis, James Brown, always the Beatles, Puccini and of course Dylan. What is the soundtrack for your movement? Wasn’t it great

that we started the conference with music yesterday? We should play music before our staff meetings.

In my movement laughter would be mandatory. Now that’s funny—mandatory laughter.

In my movement there would be more time for naps, more cell-free zones, there would be hammocks in our offices.

In my movement there would be enormous room for compassion for victim/survivors and what they go through. And there would be space to think more broadly about offenders - their accountability, sane policies. In my movement we would turn our anger into compassion and our suffering into understanding. We would work for policy to be trauma-informed and hence wiser. Cultural competency would be as natural as breathing and we would all be—much more actively—nicer to each other. And better at self-care! And encourage each other to play more.

What would your movement be like? Think about it!

I will give you a window into what MY movement would look like, going forward. First the name. I might call it “the movement to end violence against women and girls and all sentient beings.”

I challenge us to prepare for the NEW Movement to prevent violence—because it is already on the way. And it is truly going to be international—from California to Congo to Kabul. A global effort to inform, educate and liberate—until all women feel safe. I hope that the feminists who started this anti-violence movement in the late sixties–early seventies would be proud about how it has been stewarded over the years and even prouder about how it will be stewarded in the future. Feminism is about many things, but for me at its essence it is about transformation. That is what this movement is fundamentally about.

We are transforming lives, often our own, transforming language and culture, forging a culture of equality, opportunity, justice, diversity, fairness inclusivity, compassion—all moving toward a culture of peace. We know what we are against but now we must articulate more fully what we are for! That’s the kind of movement I want us to create for the future.

Without action and courage these ideas are only concepts. We must be active and brave in defining this culture of peace.

Our agency changed its name about 3 years ago to embrace its growth and maturity. We searched for a name that expressed who we had become and would be inclusive of all who joined us. We wanted a name that would inspire and one we could aspire to. We chose Peace Over Violence.

What does that mean—peace? I googled “definitions of peace.” There were 8 million sites. Some define peace as the absence of war. The Dalai Llama says there can be no peace without freedom. Mahatma Gandhi teaches us that peace is not the absence of violence but the presence of justice. So of course does Martin Luther King, who said that true peace is not the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.

Peace isn’t something that humans might achieve at the end of some apocalyptic vision. Peace exists; we can create and expand it in small ways in our everyday lives. It is permeable, not static; it is imperfect,

not utopian; it is an option and it can be chosen. Peace needs to be our most important option present in every struggle, every challenge.

Peace for our agency is a very roll-up your sleeves practice of violence prevention and promotion of healing through intervention, advocacy and education. Someone said “Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually opening, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures.” That is what the advocates for rape survivors, battered women and their allies have been doing for the past 40 years—overcoming the barriers and creating options from the personal to the professional to the political.

Peace Over Violence continues to explore what Peace Over Violence means. Our organization continues to stretch to embrace our brand and our vision/mission of building healthy relationships, families and communities free from sexual, domestic and interpersonal violence. I recently had the opportunity to receive instruction in something called the peacemaking pyramid. The peacemaking pyramid is a theory of deep change that aims for a change of heart—from a heart at war to a heart at peace. As a community we often want to fix what is wrong and we choose to do it by attacking the problem, which is at the top of the pyramid. The war on drugs, the war on gangs, the war on crime, the war on war. And we never seem to win those wars. The Peacemaking Pyramid model suggests that we put our energy into going deeper, spending the necessary time building relationships, listening and learning, finding out the way, teaching and communicating. This theory of change focuses on helping things go right, by building on relationships, strengths and connection.

I want to close with words that inspired me. “Violence is always the wrong choice. We realize that people are angry, but let the anger cause change that is necessary to keep our children, our neighbors and our friends safe.” Those words are from a 15 year old

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girl who was gang raped on her school campus after a homecoming dance in Richmond, California, while bystanders watched and did nothing. The heart of this fifteen-year-old rape victim/survivor is a heart at peace. We can learn from her. My hope for our movement is that we approach our work and the world with a peaceful heart.

I would like to share our organization's manifesto:

"Our vision is a world without violence. Where no child is abused, no wife battered, no friend raped. A world without

terror, without threats, without wounds from intentional actions. Where the strong provide for the vulnerable, where the vulnerable become empowered, where every kind of family is safe and secure, and girls and boys and women and men have a fair and equal chance at the pursuit of happiness in a tolerant and talented society."

And that's a world I'm sure we would all like to live in.

Let's keep the movement moving!