

The Call

#MeToo founder speaks at the Wharton Center

By Adam Austad

Me too. These words allow two people—who are baring their souls to each other—to understand that they are not alone. They create a moment that sheds the alienating efforts of an unperceptive world. This simple phrase immediately conveyed the feeling “I understand.” Even if they were just a start to a universal conversation that was missing for thousands of years, those two words were enough.

Hopeful members of the MSU community gathered at the Wharton Center on April 19 to hear #MeToo founder Tarana Burke speak openly about the movement she created as a part of the Transformative Justice Speaker Series. She discussed how she became aware of the need to post the original #MeToo message to Twitter that created a global community of sexual assault survivors posting their stories on social media.

“When I think of Heaven, the little girl who planted the seed of ‘me too’ in me—because I couldn’t say ‘me too’ to her—Heaven was courageous,” said Burke. “At 13 years old, she stood in my face and said, ‘Hear me. I need you to see me.’ She knew that she needed to be seen and heard and believed at 13 and she had a thing that I didn’t have. She had a courage that I didn’t have, but her courage made me dutiful.”

Xhercis Méndez, assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and the African American and African Studies Program, looked at the origins of the #MeToo movement. Méndez created the Transformative Justice Speaker Series in 2016 to explore how universities could build safer and more supportive environments for marginalized students, faculty and staff.

Quote by Xhercis

Ayanna Spencer, fourth-year doctoral philosophy student, met Tarana Burke during her Engaged Philosophy Summer Internship Program with Girls for Gender Equity in 2017. She embarked on a mission to help the organization’s “Theory of Change,” which involved nuanced and thoughtful discussions around the perception of race, gender and ethnicity. She also learned what “me too” meant before the hashtag.

“It means I am not alone,” said Spencer. “It means there are other people who can empathize with my experiences and others I can empathize with to continue to push for a safer world for all people. When I first talked to Tarana about ‘me too,’ before the viral hashtag, I remember thinking, ‘I wish I’d been in her program for Black girl teens.’ Seeing the ‘me too’ movement go viral felt like a reawakening to recommit to my responsibility to care for myself as a survivor and care for other survivors.”

Toni Cade Bambara, African-American author and social activist, said: "Revolution begins with the self, in the self." #MeToo helped people think about their connections with others. It was like a beautiful siren calling to individuals to lift their heads above the water and see all the other people fighting against the systems that made sexual violence possible. It was a call to work toward a brighter future where all people thrive together.

WC:

PN: Wharton Center, Tarana Burke, Ayanna Spencer, Toni Cade Bambara