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Bridges that Carried Us Over Project

Interview Summary

Interviewee:

Tonya Burke

Interviewer:

Lea Michelle Cash

Interview Date:

July 7, 2016

Interview Location:

Rialto, California

Interview Summary completed by:

Rossandra Martinez, 2023

Description:

Tonya Burke shares stories of her academic experiences from highschool extracurriculars to pursuing a degree at University of California, Santa Cruz. She describes the racial and stereotypical agendas pushed by society and academic institutions and how she overcame them as a single mother pursuing her graduate degree. She stresses the importance of education in her life and how she came close to giving up but continued to push through, despite others telling her to pack up and go home. Through her parents' support she ran for Perris City Council and was elected, which was a historic event as a Black woman in a predominantly Latino community. The support of her husband, children, and parents, Tonya continues to thrive on the council and as an educator. She emphasizes the influence of God and the important life values she has learned from others, most notably, the motto from her mother: "If the front door is locked, go through the side window."

Subject Topic:

- Education
- Family
- God
- Resilience
- Values
- Racism
- Pepperdine
- Community Activism
- Marriage
- Single parenting
- Childcare
- Campaigning and holding Public Office
- University of California, Santa Cruz
- South Central, Los Angeles
- Carson, California
- Perris

Spatial Coverage:

Name of Site (if relevant)	General Location/Address
Carson, California	Family home
South Central Los Angeles	Early education K-12
University of California, Santa Cruz	Earned Bachelor's Degree
Pepperdine University	Started Master's Degree
Carson	First job after graduating
Perris	Moved after graduate school, bought first family home with her husband

Temporal Coverage:

- 1990s-2014

Key Events:

- 2014- Elected to city of Perris council

Key Organizations:

- Emerge California

Interview Index:

Media Format	Time (hh:mm:ss)	Topic Discussed
Digital Video	00:00:53	Family History and Relatives
Digital Video	00:02:53	Move to Los Angeles and early education
Digital Video	00:04:24	Extracurriculars and student organizations in high school
Digital Video	00:11:57	Racist roommate and microaggressions in an academic setting
Digital Video	00:13:22	Experiences as a single parent pursuing higher education
Digital Video	00:14:39	Worked multiple jobs to pay for childcare
Digital Video	00:15:38	Confided in a counselor for guidance during personal struggles and told to give up and go home to parents

Digital Video	00:17:50	Paula Powell encouraged Tonya that her education was important, “there’s greatness in you”
Digital Video	00:23:28	Lessons learned through education, believe in yourself, you are stronger than you think
Digital Video	00:25:26	How she met her husband and their experience moving to Perris
Digital Video	00:30:48	Downfalls of moving to Perris; vehicle broken into, daughter jumped,
Digital Video	00:36:16	Counseling high school kids, seeing a different side of Perris
Digital Video	00:39:09	Wake up call from parents to find solutions for Perris
Digital Video	00:41:16	Decides to run for office
Digital Video	00:42:41	Got into Emerge California program and eventually won office in 2014
Digital Video	00:44:02	Challenges faced as a Black woman on the council in a predominantly Latino community
Digital Video	00:47:39	Mother is her inspiration to pursue her dreams, taught resiliency
Digital Video	00:49:52	Hilary Clinton comes to Perris
Digital Video	00:52:59	Goals for Tonya Burke legacy, what to leave behind for younger generation

Related Materials:

Additional oral history interviews are available from the Wilmer Amina Carter Foundation’s “Bridges that Carries Us Over Project” on CSUSB ScholarWorks, <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/bridges/>.

Full interview transcript can be found below.

Interview Transcript

Start of Interview:

[00:00:00]

Lea Michelle Cash [00:00:07] Today's date is July 7th, 2016. My name is Lea Michelle Cash. I am interviewing Tonya Burke for the Archiving History Project in the Inland Empire. Her name is spelled Tonya. If you could spell your correct name for me.

Tonya Burke [00:00:23] T o n y a B u r k e

Lea Michelle Cash [00:00:29] We are interviewing in the home of Wilma Amina Carter in the city of Rialto in the state of California. Thank you, Ms Burke, for taking the time to conduct this interview with us. Thank you. So tell us a little bit about your beginnings, where you were raised, what your family life was like. How many siblings you have. So on and so forth.

Tonya Burke [00:00:53] OK, um well, I grew up in Carson, California, which is in northern um I'm sorry, and down south in the South Bay Area of Los Angeles County and um grew up there, loved it, had my parents, Herbert and Corrine Brown, who raised me um with no siblings. So as I grew up as an only child and growing up as an only child, I had to spend a lot of time alone. And I was always one of those creative type of kids who um who was always thinking and doing and wanted to find ways to change the world um. So as my parents always say and so I spent a lot of time as a child because I was by myself um really building. I read a lot every day and night as a child. And um I found a lot of pleasure in it because to me, um the books I was reading was opening up a whole another world um for me, and that's how I learned a lot. So my parents would always buy me tons of books. And um then I spent a lot of

Lea Michelle Cash [00:02:12] time what's some of your favorite books that you read that actually made an impact on you?

Tonya Burke [00:02:20] One uh, you know, as a small child, Judy Blume was my favorite. I think I read everything that she had um. Um and uh as I got a little older, I started reading Zora Neale Hurston and um some other prominent are authors. And um but I just always had a love for for reading. And I always had a love for, like organizing um as a kid and going to school. I went to school in South Central Los Angeles

Lea Michelle Cash [00:02:57] and in those high schools, elementary, middle high school,

Tonya Burke [00:03:00] I went um I went uh to a private school which was called Covenant Lutheran. I went there from, I believe, first grade all the way to the eighth grade. And in ninth grade I went to that's in uh middle school, which was in San Pedro area. And in high school, I went to Carson high school and um my parents always told me early on they always felt that I would be either a politician or an attorney, because while I was in school, I was always organizing, always uh if there was an issue or cause that was happening at the school, I was the one that was always taking it up and and rallying students and teachers together to change

Lea Michelle Cash [00:03:52] to bring about change

Tonya Burke [00:03:52] about bringing about change in the schools, though. Um so as when I got older and when I decided to run well, when I told my parents I decided to run for public office, they said they weren't surprised at all. I think I was more surprised than they were because I've always even in college, um I've always just been very actively engaged in in the community and wanting to bring about change in bettering people's lives.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:04:24] So backing it up to to high school. Did you ever did you hold an office in high school?

Tonya Burke [00:04:29] Well, in ninth grade, I ran for student body treasurer and won that. And um all throughout high school, I was in ASB. Um if there was an organization, I was involved in it and held different positions and and those different organizations on campus like student union. I was the captain of the pep squad. And, you know, all of all of those different things.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:04:59] So you were a very active teenager,

Tonya Burke [00:05:01] very, very active teenager.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:05:03] So in all of that activity and reading and educating yourself and and seeking to bring about change, what is it when you graduated from high school that led you to the college that you went to and the discipline that you chose?

Tonya Burke [00:05:25] OK, well, I went to. I got my. A bachelor's degree from um UC Santa Cruz and I was one of those kids because I did read a lot, I I think in another life I must have been a researcher because I love to research. And I was one of those kids that did a lot of research, and especially when it came to um what school I was going to always I always knew I was going to college um. My parents always told me that if that's what you want to do, that's what you're going to do regardless of finances or any other thing. College is is going to be a part of of your life. And so I grew up knowing that and prepared myself for, OK, this is going to be the next step, even though, you know, individuals would tell me otherwise. You know, I've had some teachers. I've had, you know, other individuals, rather, they meant well or not, you know, say, oh, that's not for you or you can't afford it or you know, or not necessarily go on the university level, start off on a community college level, um because I also while I was in high school, I also went to community college. I went to Harvard College while I was in high school. So I just had that in mind. What I wanted to do and where I wanted to go um. When I was thinking about colleges to attend, uh I chose UC Santa Cruz because one, It had the uh lowest uh number of student to teacher ratio. I didn't want to go to a school where when I went to when I was in the class, I would be in a class of five or six hundred. And that was a number and not an name. So that's why I chose UC Santa Cruz. And also they at the time of all the UC, they were the ones given the best financial aid packages. So so those are some of the reasons why I chose to go to UC Santa Cruz and and I went to Santa Cruz and um majored in um psychology. Uh that wasn't my initial plan. My initial plan was I wanted to be pre-med and I thought about, OK, I want to go in medical school. And after I started taking those organic chemistry and biology classes and I said uh, this is not for me, uh I actually was taking a general education class for psychology and fell in love with the subject and instantly changed my major.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:08:11] So now hitting the campus at Santa Cruz, how did you feel as an African-American woman?

Tonya Burke [00:08:23] You know, it was very difficult because there were times uh because UC Santa Cruz at the time, I believe the percentage of African-Americans that were attending attending the school was less than five percent. So there there would be times.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:08:41] Was a tiny percent. Yes, there was a small number.

Tonya Burke [00:08:44] That's a very small number. And there will be times where I would be on the campus and I wouldn't see anyone else that looked like me even closely, remotely could look like me in weeks. You know, even in the city. I would it would be large spans of time where I wouldn't even see another African-American. Um and really, you had to kind of seek, you know, um other individuals if you wanted to have that type of engagement and interaction. And sometimes in the classroom, most of the time in the classroom, I would be the only African-American student in the classroom. And I remember having experiences where because I was the only African-American in the classroom, you become the African-American expert, you know of the African-American culture. And I remember um being in a um lecture and the instructor, she was talking about uh different cultures and um and so how we got on the subject of ghettos. And the instructor uh turned to me and asked me to elaborate on the subject. And I said, oh, I'm sorry, I wouldn't be able to because this that's not, you know, familiar to me. But it was just the the uh just the stereotype of, you know, if you're African-American or I will get X questions like, uh do you know N.W.A. Or or what's it like, you know, um knowing this rapper or, you know, so just that stereotype of if you're African-American, you're automatically associated with certain

Lea Michelle Cash [00:10:44] Certain stereotypes of such things. Yes. Not understanding that there's a wide variety of African-Americans. They come from many different cultures and backgrounds.

Tonya Burke [00:10:53] Yes. And it was very difficult my first year because um first year living on campus, I lived in that part of campus where um because the campus at UC Santa Cruz is broken up into eight different colleges. Now, they have 10 at the time it was eight. And the college that you are associated with, that's really where your residence is. And so Kresge, which was the college in which I resided, um I believe at the time there was about maybe four African-Americans that actually resided in in that particular college. And um so I my roommates were other than African-American and all of them were Caucasian. And I had one roommate in particular who um who came from a racist background. Her parents were very racist, um very rich and affluent. And um she and I initially had had some problems because she didn't want to reside in in the um apartment that we stayed. And it was seven of us and this one cog as they called it um. So and she didn't want to stay in the apartment with because I was black. And um but after um a year, uh we ended up becoming like the best of friends.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:12:30] So that always happens to you if people stay the course.

Tonya Burke [00:12:34] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:12:37] Just stay the course. Then you will find out exactly what Maya Angelou says. We are more alike than we are different.

Tonya Burke [00:12:45] Yeah. Her and her are having, you know, experiences with me. She was able to dispel the myths and stereotypes of what she has always seen and heard

uh you know coming from a small town where there weren't any African-Americans where she came from. So she she was able to um she was able to to ending up dating and marrying an African-American man.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:13:14] Isn't that amazing?

Tonya Burke [00:13:16] Yeah. Yeah. So she ended up being one of my good friends towards the end of that school year so.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:13:22] OK, so that's pretty much the experience that at UC Santa Cruz and then you move on during that time is is that when you get married or is it later on after graduating from college?

Tonya Burke [00:13:39] Well, actually, when I was in college, I became a single parent. Um I was in a relationship with my oldest two children's father. Um it wasn't the best of relationships. It actually was a really bad relationship. Um but it's something that I overcame. I end up becoming a single parent of two children and um and they are I call them college babies because they I remember because I was determined to to finish school and graduate and um get my degree. I had a lot of people telling me that I couldn't do it. A lot of folks told me otherwise. I remember. I remember. I had just found out that they previous previously I want to go see my counselor because I was struggling at school, being a single parent,

Lea Michelle Cash [00:14:38] and rightly so,

Tonya Burke [00:14:39] and Santa Cruz is one of those areas where it's very expensive and um childcare was very expensive. So I was working three, four jobs, you know, trying to pay the rent, trying to pay for child care. Child care was cost more than I was paying rent and trying to you know raise my children. And um I had just found out my son was diagnosed with autism. And so I went to um my counselor and really just needed someone to talk to and some guidance. And I'll never forget I can remember today, like it was yesterday. Um it was a cold. Santa Cruz was always cold, cold and foggy. And um I remember going to her and I said, you know, I'm really struggling and it's affecting my schoolwork, um because oftentimes my kids, they went to class with me, if I didn't have anyone else to watch them.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:15:36] To watch out [??]

Tonya Burke [00:15:38] Because I was determined and I remember going to my counselor and saying, you know, I'm really struggling, I need some help. And is there anything that you can offer or what do you suggest? And she said, you know, I suggest you pack up your bags and go home, go to your parents. Won't your parents take you back in? I was like, yeah, they will. And she was like, well, you'll never make it. This isn't for you. This is something that, you know, you should just give up on. She was like you could go there's you can get public assistance and, you know, maybe go find you a little part time retail job, you know, where your family lives and let them help take care of you and your children. And I was crying. And when she finished her counseling session with me initially, I was sad and a part of me got a little mad at my and I said, OK. And I said, I thanked her, you know, and I said, maybe there's something to it. So she gave me a withdrawal form and she said, you know, if you know, you decide you want to do it, which I strongly urge to fill this form out and bring it back to me and we'll get you right on out of here. And I said, OK, so I was I was devastated because her is someone that I trusted

Lea Michelle Cash [00:17:20] and looked up to

Tonya Burke [00:17:22] [and looked] to for that counseling guys that she was supposed to give to individuals. I wasn't getting that from her. So I went home, packed up as much as I can get in my little Ford Escort at the time and my babies and I hit the road and and I remember I stopped and got gas before we hit the road and I ran into [someone who] I felt was a mentor of her name's Paula Powell. She was the dean of African-American students at the time. She ran the African-American Resource Center. She was a great support for me and my children and lots of other students there. And I saw her at the gas station and she just came up to me. I hadn't said anything. I dried up the tears because I didn't want her to know what I was going through. I didn't even mention the news that I got about my son. I just kind of dealt with that and suffered in silence. About dealing with all that and and I remember she told me, you know, I just wanted to let you know that you're great and God feels that you're great and you're going to be doing great things. And I'm such I'm a I'm a better person having met you and know you. And she just gave me all these wonderful accolades and I was just like, what's that about? You know, it's not like I'm getting award or or anything. And and I, you know, thanked her and hugged her and got in my car and hit the road, got on that five heading towards L.A. and the whole time of crying. And my son, he's looking at me, my daughter, she was too small to really understand what's going on, but he was about a little over two. And he's looking at me and he's like, you know, like, what's wrong with you? And and so I'm driving and driving and crying and crying. And something just came over me where I said, I can't allow these people to be the ones to determine my fate. I remember my mother telling me that I can do anything that I put my mind to, that I can be anybody that I want to be and achieve anything that I want to achieve or never. But I just remember my parents and I remember Paula Powell saying the things that she said to me.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:20:03] Was greatness in you.

Tonya Burke [00:20:04] So I got off the freeway, turned back around and came back to school and unpack the things that I packed in the car. And the following week, I went to see my counselor and I had the form and I handed the form to her and she says it's blank. And I said, yes. And this girl [??] remain blank and I'm not going anywhere and [inaudible] stay here. And if I have to fight tooth and nail to get my degree, that's what I'm going to do. And that's what I did for you today.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:20:39] Yeah.

Tonya Burke [00:20:40] Yeah. And that's exactly what I did. And.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:20:43] God's mercy

Tonya Burke [00:20:46] Most definitely couldn't have done it without God. And and so that's but that's just the kind of spirit that I've always had. It was that you don't give up and same spirit when it comes to other people. My dad is like, you're always a fighter. You're always going. You always doing.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:21:09] Well, you have certainly demonstrated that, you know, you've been up against racism. You're up against being a single parent. You're you're you have a young one that had autism. And there was a lack of of of self-esteem.

Tonya Burke [00:21:26] Yes.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:21:27] All of that as an African-American woman. And then you turned it around to find that power, that strength, that something inside of you that's attached to greatness.

Tonya Burke [00:21:39] Yes.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:21:39] That propelled you forward to make the decision to dig your heels in and stay. So you graduate, you move forward.

Tonya Burke [00:21:49] Yeah, graduate. Come back to Carson. And at my first job you know job, after graduating and working in a juvenile facility with young young men who have. Basically, were incarcerated, and I I just absolutely loved that that job and in that position and working with them and because I looked at these young men. And wanted them to be able to achieve even though they made mistakes in life. I wanted to make sure that they had all the resources and the things that they need to continue to move forward and not let that one thing blemish them.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:22:41] And then there, again, is the foundation. The theme never give up.

Tonya Burke [00:22:46] Yes.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:22:47] Give back up.

Tonya Burke [00:22:48] Yes. Yes.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:22:50] So then, now you go to a master's program.

Tonya Burke [00:22:54] Yes, I enrolled in the master's program, Pepperdine and the clinical psychology, with an emphasis on marriage and family therapy. And that was like the greatest experience because it was the total opposite of what I dealt with as an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz. UC Santa Cruz was a great struggle, but I really enjoyed every bit of every moment.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:23:26] It was food to your soul.

Tonya Burke [00:23:26] Yes. Yes, yes, it was. Yes, it was. And I learned a lot about myself and going through that that that process.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:23:35] What did you learn about yourself?

Tonya Burke [00:23:38] I learned that I was a lot stronger than I thought I was. And and I had a lot more together than I thought I did, especially working with a lot of individuals. And I realized that. I would always see myself in a helping profession that I would always yes, I would always be in a position to where observing and and I knew that because, you know, when you graduate from college and you have those student loans staring at you, you know, often times people say, OK, I got to find something that's going to give me the most bang for my buck. So, you know, I can live comfortably. But I always knew that the field that I wanted to go in wasn't going to make me rich and I wasn't looking to be rich financially, but if I could sleep at night knowing that I help serve someone else and to uplift

other people so they can kind of pay it forward, that that meant more to me than anything else.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:24:50] The high salary.

Tonya Burke [00:24:51] Yes.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:24:52] So now because we're going that college route. So then you get your masters.

Tonya Burke [00:25:00] Yes.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:25:01] And how is it that you migrated out here to the Inland Empire and wound up in the city of Perris?

Tonya Burke [00:25:08] Actually um, it was my husband, Jason, and my children.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:25:13] OK, so now where in the process is Jason?

Tonya Burke [00:25:18] My husband Jason um, he's in the process of. We got married

Lea Michelle Cash [00:25:23] During the masters.

Tonya Burke [00:25:23] Yes.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:25:23] After the masters

Tonya Burke [00:25:26] We got married uh right after I finished uh my master's degree program. At Pepperdine. Yes um. We we went to Ocho Rios Jamaica and we got married uh at the best time. But um he um he's just a wonderful person um. Came into my life, actually met him at the bank um. He was working at the bank and he was always able to go and he will always write these little notes on my receipts and slip them to me and I was like, look at here, dude don't mess with my money. I'm here for one thing and one thing only, and that's to make a deposit or a withdrawal. I don't know all these little notes you keep putting on my receipt, you know, but on one day he finally just asks me out. He said, you know, you're always looking so, you know, like you're just ready.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:26:22] Focused.

Tonya Burke [00:26:23] Focus. And I said cause you talk about my money. But but yeah, we, he asked me out. I said, yes. And the rest is history.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:26:33] Is history.

Tonya Burke [00:26:33] Yeah. And he's been a wonderful father to um my two children from my previous relationship and our daughter that we share together, Jaylyn. So, he's a wonderful man.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:26:45] So its through him you winded up out in the Inland Empire in Perris.

Tonya Burke [00:26:51] Yes. Because he grew up in South Central and then Watts , he grew up in Watts. Uh lived in the projects, um you know, grew up, went to Jordan high and um moved to Carson later on. But he always wanted to be. Out of L.A. County, he wanted to be wanted to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city, and he wanted to live off our

Lea Michelle Cash [00:27:24] a slower pace of living

Tonya Burke [00:27:26] Yeah. And um for.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:27:28] So he took the drive to Perris.

Tonya Burke [00:27:31] We we would go um we would come out and take a look and at that time um. They would you know, housing was starting to build up. And in cities like Perris and, you know, different areas of Riverside and San Bernardino County, and we would come out on the weekends and just try to take a look

Lea Michelle Cash [00:27:52] dream and look

Tonya Burke [00:27:54] yeah, dream and look and dream and look

Lea Michelle Cash [00:27:56] like young people would do.

Tonya Burke [00:27:58] Yes. And um and initially he was like, let's do it. He was gung ho. And that's when the housing boom when I said no, I was like, we're not ready. But really, it was me not ready to to make that transition

Lea Michelle Cash [00:28:17] because it's a.

Tonya Burke [00:28:18] and breakway.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:28:19] It's a, it's not. It's day and night.

Tonya Burke [00:28:22] Yes. And, you know, with all your support and your resources, you know, my parents were in Carson and his family was out that way. So everything that you you know, and then I was like, OK, our kids are not that big. They're still small. You know, what if I have to work late, you have to do this. You know, I'm working in L.A., well that mean I have to go back and forth, you know? So those were the things that I was kind of worried about and hesitant about making that step. And so we would come out and we would look at different areas in the Inland Empire. And um I fell more in love with the Riverside County area. And so I started doing research on the different areas. And Perris kept popping up. And we would go and we looked at Perris, we looked at Perris looked at um Murietta. We looked at all the different areas of Riverside and he wasn't so big on Perris. And I kept looking at Perris and he said, Why you keep looking at that place and so I would talk to other people and I would saying, you know, I might be interested in moving to Perris, you know, looking at houses in Perris. And I remember people saying. Don't do that! Have you heard about that place? There's nothing but gangs and drugs and...Yeah, and it's really bad out there. Yeah, and there's nothing out there and the people aren't doing anything out there. And I was like, well, it's something that keeps here to where I keep looking,.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:30:08] Going back.

Tonya Burke [00:30:09] To Perris and we would keep coming out and visit. And then my husband got to the point where he was like, you know, I'm tired of dreaming and I don't want to go out and look at houses any longer because we're not making that step. And I told him, you know, let's wait, let's wait, because that's when everybody was buying houses. And I'm glad we wait because we we came in when the bubble burst, and you know, we came back on the downstroke. So I'm so glad we did wait because that was the best move we could have because, you know, we could have been like a lot of the other folks out there and in hot water

Lea Michelle Cash [00:30:45] got stuck in hot water.

Tonya Burke [00:30:45] Yeah. Yeah. Underwater.

Leo Michel Cash [00:30:47] Upside down or.

Tonya Burke [00:30:48] Yeah. And so um I look at all the demographics of Perris before the move. I knew it had high unemployment. I knew the poverty rate was high. I knew that they had a lot of crime issues. I knew all those things, but I still had this.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:31:11] Desire.

Tonya Burke [00:31:11] Desire to be in Perris. You know, we have family members who said you're making the biggest mistake of your life because you moving to a cesspool. That was the exact word that uh a friend of mine said she was like move to Riverside, move to even Moreno Valley, move to anywhere, but don't move to Perris because Perris is a cesspool um. But I just kept you know, I said, you know what, there's a reason why we need to be there. And so my husband was like no, we're not going to Perris because everyone has said everything negative about Perris. And a few times we have went around, he was like, oh, no, I'm getting some flashbacks from from being in L.A. at South Central. So we looked and um it was Menifee and we actually put a bid on that house and that fell through. It was uh a it was a uh foreclosure uh bank owned. So that fell through. And we went to, what other city? San Jacinto. That fell through. Murietta, that fell through, so he was to the point, you know what, forget it, we'll just stay here in Carson. We'll just make do, because this is just too heartbreaking to continue to go through this and, you know, these things keep happening with these bank owned homes, because at the time, that's really what was out there. And so our realtor at the time was like, well, let's go check out Perris. And I had already told her and had given her Perris, don't say Perris speech. If you still want to have your job and the realtor don't say Perris to my husband and she was like, well, let's just go check it out. There's this is one house. You know, it's not bank owned. So we pull up to the house. My husband goes, No way. And because it had some issues. Yeah, He's not one of those individuals that see, me I can see the diamond in the rough and see it.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:33:28] The lipstick in rouge thats what I call it.

Tonya Burke [00:33:28] He can't see that. But they had some brand new homes around the corner. So we took a look at those. Fell in love, put a offer, everything went perfect. And so I told him it was meant for us to be in Perris. We tried to be everywhere else, but it was meant for us to be in Perris. So that's how we got to Perris.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:33:52] Isn't that amazing, that's an amazing story. Yeah, I guess you were meant to be where you were supposed to be. And then you put your bucket down and when you put your bucket down, you got connected to everything in Riverside because. Because looking at how many boards you're on, how active you are in the community. And then in 2014, you become elected to the city of Perris council. So tell us about that experience and why you made that choice to run for city council.

Tonya Burke [00:34:28] Well, in living in Perris and like I said before I came to Perris, I did I did some homework on it. But, you know, when you're not in something, you say, oh, it's not that bad um. And when we moved our first six months, we have moved into Perris. We had our house broken into. We had our vehicles broken into um. Our daughter was walking to school and she got jumped by uh 10 girls walking to school. And so I said, something is going on here, you know? And when I went to my neighbors and talked to them and I said, hey, you know, we got our house broken into and they were like, "oh, you didn't know? that's like the welcome package for new residents when they come to Perris. They was like, well, that's welcome to Perris." And there was this attitude all around where people were just like, well, that's what you get from Perris. And it was that was just good enough. And my parents always taught me, you live and strive for excellence. And so that's the attitude that I had. And I was seeing things in some of the schools and I said something is going on here. And shortly after we moved, I was able to transfer my job working with the state of California, vocational rehabilitation. And lo and behold, the assignments that I get is the schools in Perris. And so I started seeing a different side of Perris, you know, not just as a resident, but as worker in Perris and working in the schools and seeing how, you know, talking to some of the kids and asking them, OK, because my job is to prepare them um for when they graduate, to go on.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:36:16] To work.

Tonya Burke [00:36:16] Yeah to work and careers and college and counseling and guiding them in those directions. And I go in these high schools in Perris and talk to these kids.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:36:27] You have to stand up

Tonya Burke [00:36:27] Yeah, and they would say, you know, I never forget it was this one young man. And I said, well, what is it that you want to do when you. Well, I want to go to college, but that's just not going to happen. And I want to be a fireman, but that's not going to happen. And I said, well, why can't that happen? It's just not, not in the cards for me and my family. And I said, what do you mean by that? And he said, no, I'm just going to go into the family business. And so I said, OK, so I'm thinking maybe carpentry, landscaping and, you know, it could be any business. And so I said, well, what is your family do? He said, well, my uncle, he sells dope, so that's the same line of business imma go into he told me he can hook me up when I graduate school.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:37:18] Money, fast money.

Tonya Burke [00:37:19] I'm going to get into that. That did it for me because I said, OK, my family and I, we picked up from an element from an area to move away from gangs, from the drugs, from from that type of environment to Perris. And here I am in Perris.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:37:42] In the middle of it.

Tonya Burke [00:37:42] Having to see, have had it face to face, you know, to see OK it's alive and it's and this is here and it's not going anywhere. And so I started reaching out to the local elected in the local leadership. It wasn't getting that much of a great response that I thought and just hearing and talking to different people in the community about how they were just very unhappy with things. And it's just this is just how Perris is, you know, is, you know, the normal Perris was it's OK to not have it's OK for us to have gangs. It's OK for us to have drugs. It's OK for our, our resident just to not be educated and go on to college. That was just a normal attitude and now was just bothering me. And so I remember I called home and I was complaining, complaining big time called my mom and I was like. I'm in here and I went to the city council and they said, this is and, and this is happening and that's happening and going on and going on and on and mother said, OK, OK. She wouldn't say much. That's not like my mother. And so I was just going on and on

Lea Michelle Cash [00:39:07] Ranting and raving.

Tonya Burke [00:39:09] And next thing you know, the phone got disconnected. So I said, oh, must be to cell connection. So I called her back, her home number. So I called and I started back up where I left off, going off on a Perris this Perris, Perris, and the phone got disconnected again. And so I said, it must be my phone. So I pick up my landline and call her. So I call back my dad picked up the phone. And I said "what happened? I was on the phone with mom and phone got disconnected." He said, "Well, what were you talking about?". So I start ranting and raving to him, going on and on and on, and I hear him hang up the phone. So I said, what is going on here? My parents is hanging up on me. So I called back and I waited a little while and I said, they must be upset with me about something. So I'm trying to think, what did I do or what didn't I do? You know? So I call them back. And I said, you know, my mom answered the phone and I said, "you hung up on me.", and she said, "yes, I did, and I will continue to hang up on you.". She said, "you know, you've been living in Perris for about six, seven months now.". And she said, "we have heard you talk about the things that are wrong in your city, and what you don't like about your city. And you don't like this. And this is wrong and that's wrong.". She said, "when you're ready to have a conversation about solutions, when you're ready to have a conversation about what you can be doing to to make some changes about your city, then you give us a call back and there we'll be ready to talk to you." So I was like, OK, that was.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:40:52] A wake-up call.

Tonya Burke [00:40:53] Yes. For me, because I had the type of parents my parents grew up in the South, segregated South, you know, marched with King in Selma. You know, my dad was a union member. So as a kid, you know, walking picket lines, I didn't have the type of parents that was one of those lies down and take it kind of parents. I have one of those parents that you want to see some change and you get out there and make it happen.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:41:15] In front of the line.

Tonya Burke [00:41:16] Yeah and so, you know, that just really hit it for me. And so shortly after that, I said, you know what? I think I'm going to run for office. You know, I had the whole time I had people just tell me you should run for public office. You should run for public office, especially in my union, because I'm a union member. And I said, "That's not me. I'm not a politician.", and then I remember a good girlfriend of mine in the union said, well, thank goodness, because we don't need any more politicians. We need people who want to serve, who care about the community. So she said, and you're doing that already.

So move out, step outside of the title, because I was like, I'm not into politics, I don't do well in that. I'm not talking about foreign affairs, and, you know, I'm not into all of that.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:42:08] Economic development.

Tonya Burke [00:42:10] And she was like, and you don't have to be. She was like, but you're into people. And that's what the core of why you're doing what you're doing. And so it took a little while, took a little people, poking the pride and standing on top of me and I finally decided that I was.. And so I'm the type of person that I'm all I like to be prepared in anything that I do. So I apply for this program called Emerge California. And it's a program that recruits and trains women to run for public office. And it's like the Harvard and Yale of political training. And so a friend of mine had encouraged me. Same friend who told me you should run. And she was kept thowing Emerge. Me and I said, look, if this the Harvard and Yale of political training then I'm not to get in a program because I'm not a Harvard and Yale political person. And so I applied, got in and the moment I completed the program, I started running for public office and then won in 2014 and got on the council.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:43:29] And so there's a mindset that's in Perris. There's an old good old boy mindset that's in Perris. Yes. So when you were elected to the city council. What was the beauty that you saw when you sat on that council and on the other hand, what were the challenges that you saw sitting on that council? Because it came with both.

Tonya Burke [00:44:02] Yes, it did. Well, you know, when I ran for council, I had a lot of people telling me not to. I had a lot of the experts saying I would never get the position because I'm a black woman. I had so many people tell me that it's not in my cards. Don't do it because Perris is a predominantly Latino community. Over 70 percent of the population is Latino. And they said, because I'm not Latina, there's no way I would win that race. And especially at this time, David and I was running. And they said there's no way they will elect two of you, you know. So, you know, I'm the kind of person who, if you tell me I can't do something, I ain't gonna do something, I won't do anything. I'm the type of Person that says, "OK, yes, I am.", and so I ran, um, and won and actually got the highest votes of everyone that was running. And I remember the night of the swearing-in because that night when I looked into the room, the chamber, the council chambers, never had I seen in Perris. One that many people come to the city council chambers for anything. Two to see so many different people of all walks of life, of all races, all cultures, all ages, you know, all types of folks, you know, people, you know, who were poor, just all types of people were there and were very excited and very happy about the change that happened with that, with that, race, with David and myself coming on the council. And it was at that point that it really um registered to me or how important the role in the position that I'm in. And then it also not only how important that I need to make sure I do what I need to do in order to to help, you know, move the city in a direction that it needed to move in. And so I always um keep that in mind. You know, I had a friend of mine when I was, when I was running, I had a friend of mine who told me. I had a friend of mine that, that said, you know, always remember why you were doing what you're doing and you won't get caught up in the celebrity, you know part of the whole politics. And so what I did was.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:47:10] Because that can so easily happen.

Tonya Burke [00:47:12] Yeah.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:47:13] So that's going to that's gonna lead to my I have two more questions and it's gonna to it's going to lead to who inspired you, who, who has been your

inspiration. Has there been a couple of people or has it just been your parents or what inspired you to, to be this strong, beautiful African-American woman that you are today?

Tonya Burke [00:47:39] I would have to say, my mother, my mother has been a true inspiration. My mother is one of those kick butts and take names kind of ladies. And she's always instilled in me that, you know, my dad, he's the softy of the family. And my mother is the one that oh no if there's a door in your way would kick it down her one of her. One of my favorite sayings that she says is cause, you know, she's from the south and folks from the south always have some something, you know, some little sayin. And she always tell me, well Tanya if the front door is locked then go through the side window? You know, she, she always taught me that don't let anything or anyone stop you or determine what it is that you want in life. And I've always, you know, kept that with me. And she was so tough. I was also so afraid, you know, oh, my mom find out I'm not doing 100 percent. She go come and get me. So that's always in the back of my mind. Even today on the council, because she follows. She'll send me and she'll call me and say, I saw this on Facebook or I saw this on, you know, on the Internet. This person said this. I heard this going, oh, what's your plans to address it? You know? So, you know, she she is she's one of my biggest supporters, but she's always like this. I have what I call a chin chicken crew that I keep around. And make sure that they check my chin and any and all calls to make sure I stay on a path that I need to stay on any given time and they'll pull my coattail. And so she has no problem with.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:49:35] Doing that.

Tonya Burke [00:49:35] Pulling my coattail. And, you know, recently we had a Hillary Clinton come to Perris, which was.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:49:44] Mhm.

Tonya Burke [00:49:44] A major thing. And and I played a great role in it.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:49:50] Yeah, I saw the pictures

Tonya Burke [00:49:52] And the congresswoman, Maxine Waters, very grateful to her for that. And my parents are like the biggest Clinton supporters. But I did not tell them that Hillary Clinton was coming to Perris because it happened so fast. And so she and my dad found out. We talked to one of my kids and they said, oh, yeah, your mom left because we were on vacation when it happened. So I had to leave and fly down for the event and then fly back. But my daughter told my Dad, "Oh Moms not here with us on vacation. She went back home," and he's like, "What happened! What, why did she go back home?" And it's like, "Oh, she has some important business over there." My dad call, "What happened that so important that you had to leave your family on vacation and come back. And I said Hillary Clinton's coming down. And he was like, "Oh, I'm gonna tell your mom because she'll have a fit if Hillary Clinton's coming and she's not there. And I said, OK. I said, but I couldn't. I said, I have to make sure that the residents, the people, Perris, had to see us and understand, you know, this person benefits that come with the position. Well, we not having no person benefits this coming position, he said. So I won't tell her. And so he had my son because he doesn't do the text. So he had my son text on this. He texts me. He said he said, get your armor on. He said because grandma found out about Hillary Clinton. She saw you on the news and she said, I always have to find out everything was going on in Perris on a news on Facebook or on the Internet. I got a daughter sitting on the council

and I have to find out what's happening in Perris from somewhere else. So, I caught it with that one place, but she was very happy to see that happen for the city Perris.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:51:46] The city of Perris. So now my final question is. It's a question that needs to be asked of all young politicians.

Tonya Burke [00:51:58] Mhm.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:51:59] Because 20 years from now, 15 years from now, when you have passed the torch.

Tonya Burke [00:52:04] Mhm.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:52:04] Or moved on in your political career, which more than likely will happen, and that young person looks at this interview, what is it about your legacy or what is it that that young person do you feel is going to say that you did actually accomplish in this first chapter of your life regarding becoming an elected official?

Tonya Burke [00:52:29] Well, I think, you know, and that's a great question because one of the things I always when people tell me that they want to either move on or move up in a position or higher office, you know, friends that I have that are serving are just people who want to move on and do other things. I always ask them, what kind of legacy did you leave? What did you do? Did you do what you set out to do? And the one thing that I think that I want individuals to take from me and serving it is that. I remain true to who I am, um where I came from. I didn't lose that in the process and that the people who I serve always came first. You know, I want to always make sure that, yes, I'm a politician, but I'm a child of God and a servant first. And I want that to always be reflected in everything that I do and um unapologetically, you know, because I've gotten flak about being a Christian woman and saying so from the dais. And, you know, I've had people tell me, stop telling people that, you love God or you're a Christian because they won't vote for you or they won't say, well, then I'm not there, I'm not their candidate anyway. So I just want to make sure that they always leave behind, that you can do this job, be true to yourself, be true to who you are, and still serve your God in doing so. And that's what I want to leave behind. That's what I want people to know that I put God's people first.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:54:25] OK, well, that's a wrap. We want to thank you.

Tonya Burke [00:54:30] Thank you.

Lea Michelle Cash [00:54:30] Ms. Tanya Burke, so much for this interview. We've got a little snapshot into you and we have enjoyed this interview. And we thank you for coming on.

Tonya Burke [00:54:41] Well, thank you. I appreciate it. I enjoyed it. And I'm looking forward to seeing it. And I think it's a great project and one that's needed.

End of Interview:
[00:54:56]