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Kim Carter's Coming Back Strong

Jul 17, 2023

Drawing on her own remarkable story, Kim Carter helps other women find new hope and a new life

Don't tell Kim Carter it's ever too late to turn a life around. Since climbing out of her own deep hole of drugs, homelessness, and prison, she has spent her life offering a helping hand and no-nonsense advice to other women caught in seemingly unchangeable circumstances.

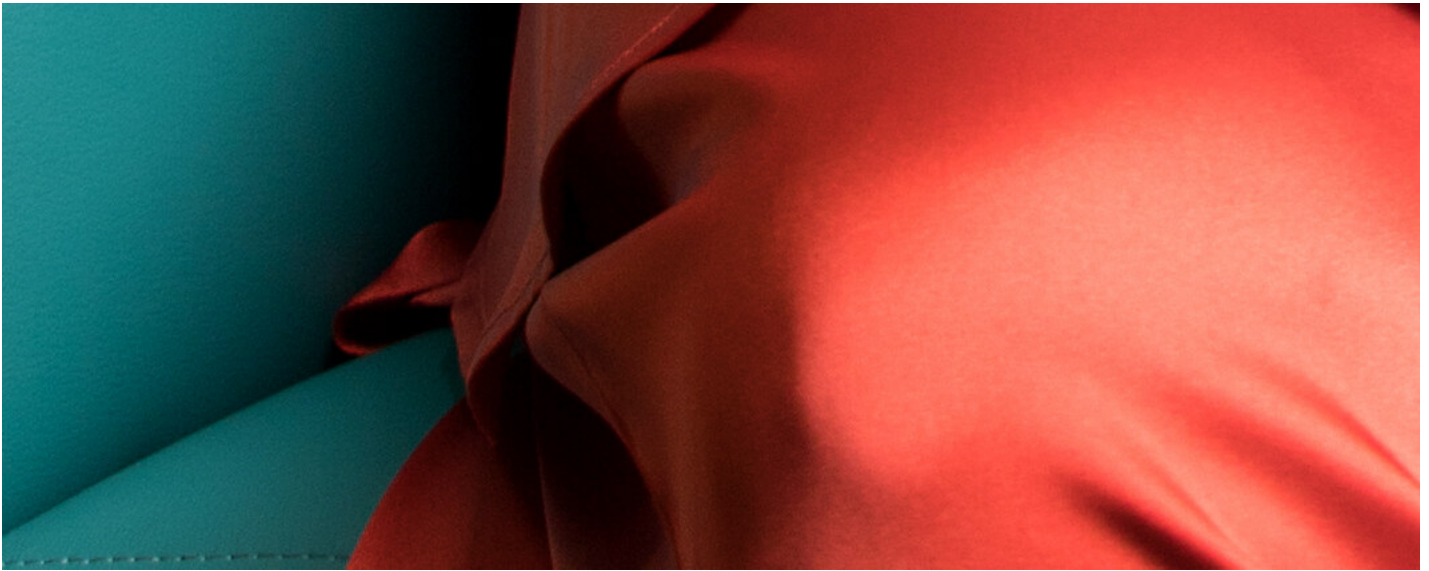
A CNN Top 10 Hero in 2015 for her work and part of Inspiring Leader magazine's 2023 Top 10 Leaders, Carter is portrayed by Oscar winner Jennifer Hudson in "Tell It Like a Woman," a new inspirational movie featuring her story among several celebrating life-transforming courage and determination.

Carter accepts those and other accolades as "a chance for me to tell people that when you see somebody on that bus bench, and she's homeless, laying there covered in plastic, do not count her out because that's Kim Carter, and she'll be back. When you see a woman that's going in and out of prison that can't seem to get it right, do not count her out. That's Kim Carter, and she'll be back, and when she comes back, she's coming back strong."

Sober now for 30 years, Carter's inspiring story is proof that it's actually never too late to change the course of your life, she tells WayMaker Journal. "Do not listen to nobody telling you that you waited too long. Do not listen to nobody who you've known all your life that hasn't helped you get to but where you are right now."

She knows firsthand the struggles some women face because of their backgrounds. Growing up with a single mom, they shared a three-bedroom apartment in New York City with two other families. Molested by a babysitter and exposed to violence and addiction, "I never really felt good inside my skin... I carried these deep-rooted wounds." Going to school was not only a refuge but somewhere she could be sure of getting something to eat.

Drugs dulled some of the pain ("I was 90 pounds soaking wet; I was cracked out"), but also led to repeated prison time for possession. Carter's redemption came unexpectedly. During another stint behind bars, she was encouraged to apply for a place in a new program called Forever Free. Though she had reservations, she applied and won one of the 100 slots available. As part of the trauma-informed care she received, she began to recognize the extent of the pain she had experienced and tried to bury deep. "Physical abuse, mental abuse, it was still on top of the little 5-year-old girl who was being molested," she remembers.



“Do not listen to nobody telling you that you waited too long”

On her release, Carter was given the chance to go for further treatment rather than return to her familiar environment, which usually ended with her back in prison before too long. "So, I took a chance... and that's the moment that I woke up [to the fact] that something could be better because I did something different, and I expected something different. It was that decision to go to that program instead of going back to the community that saved me."

After finally breaking free from her cycle of hopelessness, Carter wanted to help other women do the same. First, she founded the Time for Change Foundation, serving homeless women and children. Having started with two shelters for women coming out of prison, Carter then began leasing apartments to provide longer-term solutions, but there weren't enough available to meet demand. So, she built the Center for Housing Advancement and Motivational Projects (CHAMP) in San Bernardino, California.

"Everything I've ever done has been about what do women need so they can grow, so that they can be self-sufficient, so they can thrive, so we can get our kids back out of the foster care system," she says.

'Make a change'

Providing housing is a good start, but it doesn't solve everything. Carter realized women also need help to get ahead economically, so she developed the BBOP (Black and Brown Opportunities for Profit) Center in San Bernardino. Opened in March, the 10,000-square-foot development includes offices, a cafeteria, shared workspaces, a children's play area, and "fast-pitch rooms" where women entrepreneurs can pitch their ideas to potential investors. Having told anyone who is struggling with life-controlling problems that there is still hope, Carter would then advise: make a change. "Go out and do something different. Go to a program in another city to get out of your neighborhood," she says. "Do what you've got to do to make that change, but do not tell yourself that it's over, 'cause it ain't never over, and there's no fat lady gonna sing."

Carter also suggests separating yourself from people who aren't there for you. She wishes someone had told her when she was 18, "You don't really belong to this family. You don't have to stay with these people. You don't fit in." Sometimes you need to get away from toxic people. "I had to separate myself," she says. "I do my family in doses, and only some people. I do not have to be in situations or with people who do not value me and uplift me."

Carter believes the tough years she writes about in her 2022 memoir, *Waking Up to My Purpose*, helped prepare her for her life's work. "When we come back from a devastating, life-threatening situation and we come on the other side of it, we're smarter, we're stronger, we're more clever," she says. "We have lived two lifestyles in one lifetime. We are able to see things other folks can't see." Put those street smarts together with some book smarts, she adds, "and we become unstoppable."

“I do not have to be in situations or with people who do not value me and uplift me”

Though Carter has worked hard to effect change, the results have not all been about personal effort: faith is an integral part of Carter's work. God "pulled me out of the belly of the beast and dusted me off," she says. "He has put me on stages and in rooms that I don't even know how I get into"—including speaking at the United Nations in New York earlier this year, for International Women's Day.

Carter sees God's hand in how things have come together for her. "Things that are unbelievable are believable in my world because they happen on a regular basis," she says. But that's because "it's always about the people: If I say, 'God, I want to be a millionaire tomorrow,' he's gonna be like, 'Hahaha.' If I say, 'God, let me help these women,' he ushers in the provision and it happens just like that, all the time."

Talking of the unexpected, Carter tells of finding love later in life and preparing to marry Anthony Tillman a few weeks after this interview, "somebody who loves me for me, not because of all I've done, but just somebody who loves Kim Carter."





KIM CARTER:
MY WAYMAKERS

The rooms of the Forever Free program, the 12-step community, Cocaine Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous . . . those are my waymakers because that community is solidified in spiritual principles, [which are] our design for living. So, when other people don't know how to respond, don't know how to react, I have a design for living that has been built based on my fellowship and my ability to work these 12 steps. I have a spiritual component that gives me my foundation. The women who have inspired me to "be the change" are people like [mayor of Los Angeles] Karen Bass, Acquanetta Warren [mayor of Fontana, California], [first Black Congresswoman] Shirley Chisholm, Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman—those are the ones that I feel connected to.

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