

A Tête-à-Tête With the former Miss World Linor Abargil

Written by Kam Williams

Sunday, 28 February 2016 19:03



Beauty Pageant-Winner Talks about Traumatic Rape and Dedicating Her Life to Helping Other Survivors

A national heroine in Israel, Linor Abargil was crowned Miss World in November of 1998. A month and a half before the Miss World competition, she had suffered [a brutal rape](#) while modeling in Italy. After the subsequent trial, which resulted in a 16-year prison sentence for her rapist, young Linor

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Abargil

made a public statement before the entire nation of Israel, counseling other women to not be afraid of reporting their rapes, and to seek punishment for the perpetrators.

She then returned to a private process of healing but resolved to one day do something about the crime of rape.

Abargil immersed herself in drama studies and was soon cast in leading roles on the Tel Aviv stage. In 2008, she launched a website, www.bravemissworld.com, and embarked on a speaking tour to encourage other victims of rape to speak out, to not blame themselves, and to not stay silent. She subsequently enrolled in law school, graduating with an honors degree in 2013 before beginning an internship at the Tel Aviv District Attorney's office.

Currently, Linor Abargil is highly-sought internationally as an inspirational speaker on the subject of combating violence against women. Here, she talks about

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ave Miss World

, a very moving documentary in which she tells her own story and reaches out to other survivors.

The Emmy-nominated documentary is screening on Netflix, amazon, iTunes and all digital platforms. And her website has become one of the leading resources for survivors worldwide.

Kam Williams: Hi Linor [Abargil], thanks for the interview.

Linor Abargil: Thank you, Kam [Williams].

KW: As a former Miss World, what do you think of the mistake Steve Harvey made recently crowning Miss Colombia instead of Miss Phillippines in the Miss Universe pageant?

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LA: That was crazy! It looked so unreal, that I started thinking it was staged... They let poor Miss Colombia stand on stage with the crown for an eternity. I think they should have just let her win, despite the mistake. It was so embarrassing.

KW: I'm sorry about your stabbing and rape. Why did you decide to make a documentary about the assault?

LA: Ever since I was raped and crowned Miss World, women all over the world approached me to say the same thing happened to them. Knowing that I had been through it, too, and that I wasn't afraid to talk about it, helped them to not feel so alone, and to know it wasn't their fault. I always wanted to make a documentary that would reach many more people than I could in person. But it took me ten years to get the courage to do it. My friend Motty Reif always encouraged me to do it, and he believed that it could be very impactful. Then we found a great team of women filmmakers to help me tell the story: director Cecilia Peck and producer Inbal Lessner.



KW: What message do you want people to take away from *Brave Miss World*?

LA: If something happened to you, it wasn't your fault. You don't need to be ashamed, and don't stay silent. The only way to heal is by getting it out in the open. Find a friend you trust, a family member, a professional person, or an anonymous hotline. But don't keep it buried inside, because it will eat you up. No matter what you were wearing, or where you were, or what you did, it wasn't your fault, it was the rapist's fault.

KW: You were only 18 at the time, and the perpetrator was your travel agent, a person you had every reason to trust. Did that betrayal affect your ability to trust other people?

LA: I still trust in the goodness of people. But I learned that there is evil in the world and I have never felt safe from danger in the same way that I did before. It took away my innocence.

KW: The attack occurred just 7 weeks before the Miss World contest. Did you consider withdrawing from the event?

LA: Yes, I did. But I had to represent my country, Israel, and also my mother thought it might help get my mind off the terrible thing I had just been through. I never thought I would win. Israel had never won. I didn't even bring enough dresses! But I think the judges saw a girl who was very determined, and I must have had a quality that stood out from the rest.

KW: I know that your mother was a pillar of support. Still, it must have been hard to summon the courage to pursue the prosecution of your attacker.

LA: I was very lucky that from the moment I called her that night, my mother gave me complete support and encouraged me to go straight to the police and the hospital. I always knew that he needed to pay for what he did. I would never have backed down from seeing him put behind bars. But, I was only 18, and it was very hard to go through a very public trial during my year as Miss World.

KW: He was found guilty and sentenced to 16 years. Do you think you would've been able to get a conviction without the DNA evidence?

LA: The DNA was everything. He had been accused of rape and tried in two different countries prior to my case, but he had been able to convince judges that he was innocent. He is a very skillful, manipulative predator. So, the DNA evidence in my case was very important. If some of the women he raped before me had had the same evidence, maybe he wouldn't have been free to rape me in Milan. But I was able to put him away for 16 years, the longest sentence ever given for rape in Israel at that time. It should have been for life.

KW: How did the trauma shape your reign as Miss World?

LA: I was not able to fulfill all of my duties, because the trial was very long and difficult. Also, I was in too much trauma to travel. I needed to be close to home and my family. I was not the best Miss World. But I think that today I have given real meaning to the crown.

KW: Why did you decide to study law when you originally planned to major in communications?

LA: I thought my life experience would be useful as a lawyer. I was always interested in the law and, although I went back to school late, I graduated with honors and began work in the Tel Aviv District Attorney's office, the same place where I went for help when I was a young girl who had been the victim of a brutal rape crime.

KW: You have devoted your career to empowering other rape victims to find the courage to speak out and to confront their attackers. Do you find being an activist fulfilling?

LA: I believe that it's my mission. I'm committed to making a difference to survivors of rape, and encouraging them not to blame themselves, and not to stay silent. Sometimes I wish I had an easier mission. It brings up a lot of trauma for me to do this work, and to empathize with all of

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the women, men, boys and girls I meet, and who write to our website [www.bravemissworld.com]. But yes, it's very fulfilling. When I hear from survivors who tell me how much shame they felt for so many years until they heard me speak or saw my film, or that they never had the courage to speak about it before, I know that they are on the way to healing.

KW: What inspired you to embrace Orthodox Judaism?

LA: I had a very good, simple life growing up in Netanya. Then I became Miss World, and I had a lot of success in modeling and acting. But I was missing something. Now I have a deep connection to God and to the meaning of life. My faith gives me a lot of strength, and I feel that I was living in a superficial way before. Now, I'm much closer to God and to the important things in life.

KW: Do you keep a kosher kitchen? What is your favorite dish to cook?

LA: I look forward to baking the challah every Friday. I love Shabbat!

KW: Was there a meaningful spiritual component to your childhood?

LA: My parents were secular, but I had aunts and uncles who were religious.

KW: Ling-Ju Yen asks: What is your earliest childhood memory?

LA: I'm at my grandmother's house with my sister and cousins. We spent a lot of time at my grandmother's house, because my parents were working long hours, and she helped raise us. I have the best memories from that period. My grandmother was the love of my life, and she passed a year ago. I miss her every day.

KW: Who else loved you unconditionally during your formative years?

LA: Both of my parents, and my sister and brother.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

LA: I've been asked so much, there's hardly anything that I have not talked about, but if they didn't ask, there's probably a good reason. I would really rather keep some things to myself.

KW: Sherry Gillam would like to know what is the most important life lesson you've learned so far?

LA: Even if you've been through something really hard, you have to get up every day, put a smile on your face and go out into the world. Then one day, that smile will be there by itself, not because you put it on.

KW: The Viola Davis question: What's the biggest difference between who you are at home as opposed to the person we see on the red carpet?

LA: I'm much funnier at home.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

LA: A child... a woman... a good person.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

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LA: I would ask that everything will be good in the world. No wars... the sick would get better... just for everything to be good.

KW: The Tavis Smiley question: How do you want to be remembered?

LA: As someone who wasn't afraid to speak up, no matter how hard it was.

KW: Finally, what's in your wallet?

LA: A Siddur [prayer book] and antibiotics. I just recovered from a very bad flu after performing 54 stage shows in a month.

KW: Thanks again for the time, Linor [Abargil], and best of luck with the film.

LA: Thank you for being interested, Kam [Williams]! I hope anyone who has survived a rape or knows someone who has, will go to our website [<http://www.bravemissworld.com>]. We have over two million visitors and everyone who posts their story gets personal responses from a very supportive community. I'm very proud of the reach of the website and of the film, which is now available all over the world on Netflix, iTunes, Amazon, and everywhere.

To order a copy of Brave Miss World on DVD, visit: <http://www.bravemissworld.com/buy>

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