

Legacy in the Making

HERASSMENT

Carmen LoBue is a writer, director, producer, actor, teacher, and activist committed to dismantling social injustice through film, most recently via her documentary series, *HERassment*, which explores harassment from the perspectives of marginalized people from all walks of life. Driven by a personal ambition to “heal the world” with her art, LoBue is passionate about amplifying stories from the perspective of underrepresented groups, including the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, and womxn of color. Her first short film, *Splinters*, debuted at the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, and her comedy-drama series, *Koi*, was a semifinalist for the Sundance Institute’s YouTube New Voices Lab. Most recently, she produced *White Flags*, a short film that explores the meaning of consent. She also produced, co-wrote, and starred in *O, Ryan*, a post-apocalyptic psychological thriller that responds to the opioid epidemic in America today. In 2018, LoBue was recognized as an honoree of the inaugural New Legacy Makers’ Showcase, a collaboration between The Legacy Lab and the Disruptor Foundation, for her commitment to addressing social justice issues through film.



Later that day, something clicked and I thought, “Oh no! I have to do something about this right now, because my younger sister is going to grow up and the world is not going to be ready for her—and she’s not ready for the world—and I know my mom isn’t talking to her about it. I need to make something that I can put on the Internet so she can see it and not feel alone and strange, the way I did when I was 10 years old.” And then I thought about how my younger brother needed this just as much as my younger sister.

I’ve always been dissatisfied knowing that sexual violence against womxn happens globally all the time. It’s not something that we tackle head on, but it happens here in America, starting with the little things. I wanted to examine what those little things were. And I knew I had to do something. So, I decided that day that I was going to make a documentary. Though I didn’t know what I was going to call it yet.

Where did your idea for *HERassment* come from?

■ Two summers ago, I was shooting an intersectional feminist film with themes of harassment that I had written when an actress was harassed by a pedestrian on set. I

turned the camera around on the guy harassing the actress and said, “You know what, can you do that again on camera for me so I can film it?” And he actually did. We had to stop, because it was so uncomfortable. I realized then that there is still so much work to be done.

Who are some of the people who have influenced *HERassment*?

■ The first person I went to was Jill Diamond. I call her my fairy godmother and she is one of the strongest womxn I know. She is amazing. She has lived many lives. She has reinvented herself many times. She's a philanthropist. I talked to her about what I wanted to do, and as we started talking about names, I said, "I'm going to name it *Harassment*." And she responded, "Yeah, you should spell it like H-E-R." And I just said, "Yes. Hell, yes. I'm doing this!"

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Two of the other most influential people in my entire life are my grandparents. Both have indirectly inspired a lot of my work. They adopted my mom, a mixed child, through Catholic services in 1970, which was around the time of *Loving v. Virginia* —the United States Supreme Court case that legalized interracial marriage. They wanted

more kids, and my grandpa, who I call Papa, said they adopted her in response to the '60s counterculture and overpopulation. My grandparents were probably some of the most radical white people at the time. I also can't really talk about my activism without talking about spirituality—and my Papa fostered that in me. He raised us with the freedom to investigate anything spiritual. Since I was little, the spiritual aspect of my life has been the most revelatory. It has taught me to always be thinking about service, compassion, and how I can be more forgiving.

Besides that, I can't say that I directly asked anyone else for help. I told people, "I'm making a documentary about harassment. I want it to feel easy. I want it to feel like me and you are having a conversation like we are now. And I want to give it a music video vibe." And everyone on my team has literally come to me and asked, "How can I help?" For all of us, the process has been transformative. Once we started shooting, it began to change our lives and our conversations outside of filming.

That's fascinating. Can you explain how the process of creating *HERassment* has changed you and your team?

■ One of my biggest holy moments was when I interviewed the first white man in the film. One of the questions I got often when I started

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HERassment was, "Are you going to have men in this?" And I said, "Heck, yeah." Because men are part of marginalized communities too. So, the first white man we interviewed was a guy who has a type of dwarfism called achondroplasia. He talked about being at bars and not being taken seriously but being seen as a source of amusement. He talked about the invisibility he feels as a person. And then he started talking about what it feels like to stand next to a womxn walking down the street and how he could say to himself, "This is where I feel similar and this is where I feel different."

I just kind of lost it. It's not that I ever believed men couldn't be feminists. I already believed in community across all backgrounds. But hearing it from his perspective just left me at a loss for words. I thought, "Here's someone who deeply relates, yet also acknowledges there are experiences he'll never know." He illuminated intersection-

ality in a way that our team had never been able to put in words. It's profound moments like this that have opened up new worlds within all of us on the set. As soon as we turned the camera off that day, the conversation about marginalization in its many forms kept going. Then it expanded outside of the room. Other people got word about it and it just kept snowballing. And it's still happening. That's what you need to start a movement—you have to start talking to people who see things differently than you do. Each and every day, I feel like I'm experiencing some level of healing through creating *HERassment* because we're digging into topics that transform our conversations and relationships outside of that space.

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What decisions are you making as you film *HERassment* to stay focused on its lasting impact—its modern legacy?

■ I knew three things at the outset. First, I knew I wanted it to be some-

thing that would influence young people. By this, I mean I wanted to shoot it like a music video so young people would watch it. I wanted to really bring an irreverent, creative aspect; I didn't want it to be formal. In other words, I knew I didn't want to put someone in a room with a blank background and a light overhead and have them tell a super dramatic story. People tend to tune that out, because it's just too much. I also knew that we couldn't do it without swag; I knew I needed to find a way to capture a relatable voice and a casual vibe. I wanted it to feel normal, like talking about these issues with your friends.

Second, I knew that I wanted it to be something that anyone could see or find. Initially, I wanted to release just 15-minute episodes online. Then I realized that the material could live in so many different worlds—I just have to constantly think of how to retell the story. Right now, for example, I have 15 or 20 interviews. I focus on what it's like to experience harassment when you work in sports, in schools, and beyond. Each episode goes into a different world, but examines the same questions. Eventually, we want to create more immersive experiences like live events that are empowering and allow people to feel safe. We're constantly thinking about how we can recreate *HERassment* to make it more accessible. And, of course, submitting to festivals will help us reach more people on a larger stage.

Finally, I knew that it would be important for me to represent many different types of people. The series has to be expansive and start a conversation that crosses boundaries. Harassment is a huge issue. It's not just cat-calling or rigged media or online bullying. There are so many different forms, and it affects so many different communities. So, I knew that I wanted diverse perspectives on the team and I wanted all of those stories represented in the documentary.

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What larger legacy do you hope *HERassment*—and all of your work—will have on the world?

■ I want my work to help people feel free to be themselves. Having an open heart—seeking freedom of thinking and creativity—takes work. I hope that I am remembered as a person who has an open heart, a person who is willing to do that inner work and inspires others to do the same. I hope that others feel empowered to do the work, even if they're seemingly the only ones doing it.

I also want to remind people to believe in something. Our society tells us that we shouldn't believe. It tells us the experiences that have been passed down to us, family trauma and the like, must be internalized. That we must carry that burden too. I think that's natural. It happens to all of us. We look at the history that's passed down to us and so often see only the brokenness. What's missing is the healing part—knowing how to feel through that. Knowing how to develop the tools that can lead to empowerment. That's my personal ambition—my legacy: to help people find the strength and encouragement to believe in themselves and believe there is some source of light within them that has the power to transform themselves and others.

Between writing, directing, producing, acting, teaching, and activism, you're incredibly multi-faceted. Which came first? How did you launch your career?

■ I started writing first. I was really isolated as a child, being from a mixed family in Ohio. When I was growing up, Cleveland was one of the most impoverished cities in America, and it was always very tense. I was bullied a lot and I've always been pretty introverted, so I spent a lot of my time fishing, reading, and writing alone. My friends were the characters I read about in books and I wrote about in my own stories. So, I think my upbringing instilled in me not just introspection, but the constant sense of social consciousness that permeates all of my work.

Then, one summer, I went to a camp where we had horrible drama teachers. They were either the worst at drama or just wouldn't show up. So, we had this free period where they would have us watch movies. I ended up taking the lead because I had already seen the movies and I didn't have a lot of friends besides these friends at camp. I would say, "Okay, we're going to just have our own play." I would assign everyone their characters and what they would do. I remember somebody asking me, "Which character are you going to play? What are you going to do?" And I responded, "Who's going to watch?" Looking back, I think that's the first inclination I had to direct. I was happy to create and lead these worlds that were outside of the one I was living in.

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By high school, I was at an all-girls liberal arts private school that had just gotten a huge endowment for a theater. I was running track at the time, but I really wanted to be in a

school play about 9/11, called *With Their Eyes*. I auditioned for it even though I was scared. I thought, "Well, I can't direct because that's what the teacher does. I don't want to do lighting. I don't want to do set design. I'm going to audition for this play." I got to play this man who was about 40 or 50 years old—and I was really excited by it.

After high school, I applied to directing school. By the time I started college, I had been bullied and silenced so much that I had a really hard time connecting with people. I just didn't know how to talk to people, and I was incredibly socially awkward. And that's actually what led me to take classes at an acting conservatory. Looking back, that life experience and training empowered me to investigate the truth in all of my work.

What are you most proud of as an artist-activist? Beyond HERassment, is there a particularly meaningful piece of work or accomplishment?

■ I am most proud of the fact that I've worked on many all-womxn or very diverse film crews. Most of the film sets that I've been on have been unlike most of the industry, composed of diverse groups of people from all walks of life. I appreciate these collaborations most because they always feel like celebrations! We are doing something creative while supporting each other, building communities, gaining

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insight to various perspectives, and working on our craft. I’m also proud of myself for creating work in response to many important issues we face in our communities and for seeking out diverse groups of people to share in the creative process. My recent film, *O, Ryan*, is a short created in response to both the opioid epidemic in America and society’s relationship with addicts and addiction today.

Representation is something I’m actively trying to create in all of my work. I am a queer Blasian womxn. And to society today, that is radical. Which is unbelievable to me, because I’m just me. I just exist. But somehow, in the world we live in, that’s radical. It means so much to me to be seen and to be heard—to know that, soon, little black and brown identifying girls like me are going to see themselves represented both behind and in front of the camera. The industry is changing. People are becoming more open to different experiences. Being a part of that, to me, is huge.

Beyond any specific project, what I’m proudest of is that I’m constantly evolving and accomplishing new things.

What have been some of the most defining moments so far in the modern legacy you are writing through your life’s work?

■ I’ve definitely had some shifts in perspective that have shaped the course of my work. They happen most when I look outside of myself to people I admire, like the feminist playwright, performer, and activist Eve Ensler, who is a huge inspiration to me. I am so inspired by her ability to talk to anyone. She tells a story about speaking to a person who was in jail for child molestation or something similar. She found it really hard to see the humanity of that person and be forgiving. It wasn’t until she realized that this person had been a product of molestation herself that she was able to see that abuse was all they knew. I continue to learn a lot about compassion and activism from her.

It’s stories like this that have moved me and shaped my work. They impact not just the way I direct, but more fundamentally, in how I tell stories. I try to expand on this idea of putting myself in somebody else’s shoes with every single character that I write or work on. I try to understand why they feel the way they do, what experiences have made them so hateful to others,

and how they were hardened. I’ve learned not just to ask myself how I have been hardened, but how might other people have been and why. As painful as it is to put yourself through those questions—as painful as it is to look at yourself in the mirror and examine your own ego—that’s the work. I think that is the work that we all have to do, even though it’s pretty terrifying. And for me, that work can happen through writing, directing, teaching, or performing.

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What has been one of the greatest challenges to your filmmaking career so far and how did you overcome it?

■ One of the biggest challenges I’ve had in my career—and it happened recently—was losing a key filming location for *HERassment*, an intersectional feminist zine store. It was just full of all these great writers like Audre Lorde. It was the queerest, most empowering space. I would always go there.

One day, I was coming out of the gym and was really stressed about

finding a location. So, I went into the store and asked, “Hey, I’m working on this thing. Can I film here?” And they said, “Yes!” When I told them that I didn’t have any money, they said it was fine and allowed me to shoot on the days they were closed.

Everything was going great until one day, they had to shut down for good. At that point, I had to pause and really think about how I could continue. The space and the project had been so important to me. Would I be doing myself a disservice by settling for less in the next location? This is something I do in all of my work. I’m always returning to my initial vision and trying to match that up with where I am right now.

This is because, while your vision remains consistent, you are always different. Yes, there are core things that you’ll probably carry with you throughout your life. But you also have to allow yourself to wake up tomorrow and be a different person. Because yesterday happened and that last second just happened and now you’ve changed. So, when challenges arise, I always have to ask myself, “What was my initial vision? What do I care most about?” And sometimes I need to write everything down. Sometimes I need to say, “Okay, what do I need to feel safe? What do I need to feel my most creative? What do I need to feel like I have the energy to move on to this next moment?”

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And sometimes that’s crying. Sometimes that’s running a marathon. Sometimes I take myself so seriously that I have to go to an amusement park and ride the scariest roller coaster so that I don’t feel like such a control freak. It’s about figuring out what you need in that moment. My Papa told me a while ago, in a time when I felt like nothing was happening, “This is like the dark night. You’re in the dark-night place right now. You’ve planted all these seeds and you’re waiting to reap what you’ve sown. You’re just not there yet.”

And then he said to me, “When challenges arise, accept them.” That’s what I’m learning now. I’m constantly reminding myself, this is a challenge. I have to accept it. How can I meet it with the best of my ability? How can I meet it with pure intentions and with complete honesty? From my Papa, I’ve learned—and am still learning—not to lose sight of the vision.

As an artist and activist building an inspiring modern legacy, what advice do you have for other young leaders who want to change the world for the better?

■ Look to the thing that makes you happy. The simplest thing. If you like going to see the cherry blossoms every year, makes sure you go see the cherry blossoms every year! Because when they say “follow your bliss,” it sounds like such a silly thing; it just sounds so woo-woo that people dismiss it. But I think that’s the biggest clue you have. That is how you find your gut and learn to trust it. Following your happiness is how you clue in to walking in your divine purpose.

Beyond that, be curious. Ask questions. Seek community. The onus is always on young people to ask questions. To Google. To go to the library and read, read, read. Staying curious is what will keep you alive as a person. I listen to *SuperSoul Sunday*. I watch *Ellen* if I’m sad. I look for new music. I go see people who are speaking in the park for free. You have to be willing to do the work of investigating. But it’s not the only thing. There are all of these humans

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on the planet who have different experiences from you and who have lived through different times. You can't just ask Siri the questions. You have to ask your grandma. You have to ask your neighbor. You have to engage with other people, because everyone has a piece of the truth. Otherwise, it's too easy to scroll through Instagram for 15 hours, learn nothing new, and lose your time, Vitamin D, and overall spiritual well-being.

I know it can be really hard as a young person of color to do these things. I work with students at one of the most historically dangerous high schools in New York City. When you're young, a lot of people give you blanket advice. They say, "When you get out of school, you'll definitely have a job." They say everything's going to be so easy—which we know is not the reality for everyone. As a result, I see young people who don't have someone they feel comfortable enough with to ask honest questions about life.

I remember telling one of the students that I worked with that I had gone to school for directing. She asked how many directors were womxn. In the moment, I didn't know how to answer. I realized that I had forgotten what it was like to be where she was, because I'm not there right now. I forgot that I was one of the few who was doing this and that she didn't see that in her world. She didn't even think that it was possible for her to do something like this—to pursue her artistry.

And she doesn't have the resources to attain that right now. She's thinking, "I don't have money. I need to be a dentist and make \$300,000 a year to support my family."

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I just thought, "Thank goodness you asked a question." It held me accountable to say, "I'm going to come back with a list of all the womxn who direct theater in New York City and I will do anything I can to help you get in touch with one of them." After that, she became comfortable asking more and more questions.

That's how you open new doors. When you ask a question, you open your world—you make it larger. When you don't ask, your world stays small. One of the things I notice about womxn and young people is our fear of being nerdy—our fear of asking too much or taking up too much space. We can't do that anymore. That doesn't honor our uniqueness and what makes us valuable assets to our society at large.

So, in order to continue learning and continue writing my legacy in the making, right now I'm simply asking myself to keep asking.

From a young age, Carmen LoBue has had a natural gift for storytelling and a passion for bringing more diverse perspectives to the screen. She aims to inspire greater freedom, empathy, and interconnectedness by inviting members of marginalized communities to share their stories in her films and screenplays. Wise beyond her years, LoBue is constantly seeking new sources of learning and growth. With her forthcoming documentary series, HERassment, LoBue continues to build her modern legacy of a more empathetic world.

THIS ARTICLE IS PART OF A SPECIAL SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH THE HONOREES OF THE INAUGURAL NEW LEGACY MAKERS' SHOWCASE, A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE LEGACY LAB AND THE DISRUPTOR FOUNDATION TO HONOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF YOUNG LEADERS CHANGING THE WORLD FOR THE BETTER.

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