

# Announcing Winners of Annual Prizes for Truth-Telling in the Public Interest

Tarana Burke, Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto, Lauren Markham, and Joe Piscatella Receive the 2018 Ridenhour Prizes

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**Media Contact:** **Tim Farnsworth**, Chief Communications Director at the Project On Government Oversight, [tfarnsworth@pogo.org](mailto:tfarnsworth@pogo.org) or (202) 347-1122; **Kristine Bruch**, Operations and Program Manager at The Nation Institute, [kristine@nationinstitute.org](mailto:kristine@nationinstitute.org) or (212) 822-0263.

(Washington, D.C.)--The Nation Institute, Fertel Foundation, and Stewart R. Mott Foundation are proud to announce the winners of the 2018 Ridenhour Prizes, awards given annually for the past 15 years to extraordinary individuals “who persevere in the act of truth-telling that protect the public interest, promote social justice, or illuminate a more just vision of society.”

These prizes memorialize the spirit of fearless truth-telling that whistleblower and investigative journalist Ron Ridenhour reflected throughout his extraordinary life and career. Ridenhour exposed the horrific My Lai massacre of the Vietnam War to the public, and today, the Ridenhour Prizes continue to honor his important legacy of speaking truth to power.

This year’s awards ceremony will be held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on April 18, 2018, and hosted by Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project On Government Oversight (POGO).

This year’s winners include:

- **Tarana Burke**, founder of the #MeToo movement, whose lifelong civil rights work fighting for gender equity and empowerment has led to a major societal movement and raised awareness about sexual abuse in America.
- **Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto**, Mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, who spoke truth to power on behalf of the people of Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.
- **Lauren Markham**, author of *The Far Away Brothers: Two Young Migrants and the Making of an American Life*. Markham brings stereotypes into sharp relief with reality by introducing readers to pieces of immigrant life in America.
- **“Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower,”** directed by Joe Piscatella, follows the story of Joshua Wong, one of the student leaders of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Revolution in 2014. Joshua, 17 at the time, was arrested while protesting Beijing’s attempt to encroach on the independence of “one country, two systems” in Hong Kong.

## ABOUT THE WINNERS

### Tarana Burke

#### Winner, Ridenhour Courage Prize

Tarana Burke, who popularized the phrase “me too” as a way to empathize with sexual assault survivors more than a decade ago, is the 2018 recipient of the Ridenhour Courage Prize.

Burke is a longtime social justice activist, who in 2006 co-founded Just Be Inc., a youth organization focused on the health, well-being, and wholeness of young women of color. She is also the Senior Director of Girls for Gender Equity in Brooklyn.

In 1997, Burke met a young girl named Heaven in Alabama, who told Burke about being sexually abused by her mother’s boyfriend. Burke didn’t know what to say—and she never saw the girl again. Burke, an assault survivor herself, says she wished she had said “me too.”

Last year, “me too” independently became a viral hashtag after actress Alyssa Milano used it in response to sexual assault accusations against Harvey Weinstein, and the subsequent flood of allegations of abusive behavior by other public figures.

In October, Milano acknowledged Burke’s prior use of the phrase, tweeting that “the origin story is equal parts heartbreaking and inspiring.” Burke has been supportive of the use of “me too” as a hashtag.

"On one side, it's a bold declarative statement that 'I'm not ashamed' and 'I'm not alone.' On the other side, it's a statement from survivor to survivor that says, 'I see you, I hear you, I understand you and I'm here for you or I get it,'" Burke has said of the movement.

The Ridenhour Courage Prize committee salutes Tarana Burke and the transformative power of her vision of justice. “I look forward to continuing this work, anchored by the legacy of my predecessors and emboldened by tenacity of survivors worldwide,” said Burke. “I am so very honored to receive the Ridenhour Prize for 2018.”

Burke is currently co-writing a book titled *Where the Light Enters*, which will tell her story and recap the emergence of #MeToo.

Her career began in Selma, AL where, over the span of a decade, she worked with the 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement to develop hundreds of youth leaders across the country; with the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute as a curatorial and special projects consultant and organized the annual commemoration and celebration of the Selma voting rights struggle; and as Executive Director of the Black Belt Arts and Cultural Center where she created and oversaw cultural community programs designed for underserved youth.

**Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto**  
**Winner, Ridenhour Prize for Truth-Telling**

Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto, mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, is the 2018 recipient of the Ridenhour Prize for Truth-Telling.

When Hurricane Maria devastated the island in September 2017, Yulín made frequent appearances on national and international television. She pleaded for help, criticized federal aid efforts, and accused President Donald Trump and his administration of “killing us with inefficiency.”

In response, on Twitter, Trump accused Yulín of poor leadership and suggested that Democrats had instructed her to badmouth him.

In the wake of the storm, Yulín also took to the streets to aid her neighbors, assess their needs, and assist in the cleanup. When then-Acting Homeland Security Secretary Elaine Duke called the federal response "a good news story," Yulín had harsh words:

"Dammit, this is not a good news story," Yulín said. "This is a 'people are dying' story. It's a life or death story."

Since then, Yulín has remained an outspoken critic of federal aid efforts, and has helped to keep public focus on Puerto Rico, where hundreds of thousands of people still lack power. Of her motivation to speak out, she says: "This is not about politics; it is about saving lives." Mayor Cruz has been called "the most powerful voice on Puerto Ricans' behalf" by *The Nation*.

Yulín, who was born and raised in San Juan, moved to the United States to complete her Bachelor's degree at Boston University and her Master's at Carnegie Mellon. She worked as a human resources director at several companies, and at the U.S. Treasury Department.

She returned to Puerto Rico and entered politics in 1992, becoming an advisor to Sila María Calderón, a San Juan Mayor who later became Puerto Rico's first female governor. Yulín became involved in the Popular Democratic Party in 2003, and was later elected president of its women's organization.

In 2008, Yulín won a seat in Puerto Rico's House of Representatives. Four years later, she was elected Mayor of San Juan, defeating a three-term incumbent with the support of a coalition of students, unions, feminists, immigrants, and LGBTQ voters.

With Yulín as mayor, San Juan has become the first and only municipality in Puerto Rico where employees have the right to collective bargaining, and it has taken steps toward a municipal version of universal health care. Under her administration, San Juan is now the only municipality with a transgender health clinic, as well as an aquatic therapy clinic.

Yulín firmly believes that community empowerment strengthens the democratic process, and

that embracing differences can enrich our lives.

Because of her tireless commitment to the people of San Juan and Puerto Rico in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, Yulín has received various recognitions and awards including the Martin Luther King Center's Humanitarian Leadership Award in 2018, the Antonio Villaraigosa Leadership Award in 2018, and the AIDS Healthcare Foundation Humanitarian Award in 2017. She was also nominated by *People en Español* as one of the 50 Most Powerful Women in 2017, and *Time* magazine chose her as a candidate for Person of the Year recognition in 2017.

### **Lauren Markham**

#### **Winner, Ridenhour Book Prize**

Lauren Markham, the author of *The Far Away Brothers: Two Young Migrants and the Making of an American Life*, is the 2018 recipient of the Ridenhour Book Prize.

In *The Far Away Brothers*, Markham tells the story of identical twin brothers, Ernesto and Raúl Flores, who grew up in rural El Salvador in the aftermath of its civil war.

When brutal gangs in the region threaten 17-year-old Ernesto, the brothers flee to California to build new lives. Markham follows their harrowing journey—across the Río Grande, through the Texas desert, into the hands of immigration authorities and, ultimately, to their older brother's custody in Oakland.

In Markham's look at contemporary immigration and the migrant experience, she provides a nuanced portrait of Central America's child exodus, and critiques American immigration policy.

The twins work to pay exploitative debts from crossing the border, navigate a new language and a new school, and appear before a judge in immigration court—all while facing the triumphs and pitfalls of life as American teenagers. Markham reminds us that behind all the policies and statistics and news stories, undocumented immigrants are humans facing everyday struggles, too.

Markham, a Northern-California based writer and reporter, is a contributing editor to *VQR* where she primarily covers youth, migration, youth, the environment, her home state of California, among other topics. Her essays, fiction, and journalism have appeared in outlets including *The Guardian*, *Orion*, *Guernica*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, and *VQR*. In addition to writing, she works at a high school for immigrant youth in Oakland.

### **“Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower,” directed by Joe Piscatella**

#### **Winner, Ridenhour Documentary Film Prize**

“Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower,” directed by Joe Piscatella, is the 2018 recipient of the Ridenhour Documentary Film Prize. The student protesters in “Joshua” were a collective inspiration to the Ridenhour Film Prize committee in a time when young people standing up to entrenched power sources seems more important than ever.

Piscatella's film tells the story of teenage activist Joshua Wong, who mobilized young people in Hong Kong and risked his future after the Chinese government backtracked on its promise of autonomy to the territory. "Joshua" inspires people of all ages to find their own power and conviction to stand up for what they believe in.

After regaining control of Hong Kong in 1997, Beijing promised a kind of independent rule under the "one country, two systems" principle. But in 2010, the Chinese government announced a plan to implement a mandatory "moral and national education" program, which made no mention of the Tiananmen Square massacre in its curriculum. Opponents denounced it as propaganda.

Wong helped found an opposition group called Scholarism, which insisted on the autonomy of Hong Kong's education policy. Members of the group occupied a public park near government offices and began a hunger strike in 2012 to draw attention to the cause.

When the Chinese government announced it would vet candidates for Hong Kong's Chief Executive in 2014, Wong helped bring tens of thousands of primarily student activists to the streets in a bid to preserve Hong Kong's autonomy. Scholarism joined other organizations to fuel a major protest that became known as the Umbrella Movement (as demonstrators used umbrellas to shield themselves from police pepper spray), which lasted several months, brought parts of the city to a standstill, and led to the formation of Demosistō, a pro-democracy political party.

"I make films like 'Joshua' because I believe that story is a powerful way to get people to pay attention to issues that are often ignored or underreported," said Piscatella. "I am both proud and humbled by this award: proud, because the award recognizes the tremendous feats of Joshua Wong and his friends who have braved tear gas, police brutality, threats of being disappeared or jailed to stand up for Hong Kong against the largest government on the planet, and humbled to be carrying on the spirit of Ron Ridenhour."

"Joshua" won the World Cinema Documentary Audience Award at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and is now a Netflix Original in nearly 200 countries. Joshua Wong was recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his activism portrayed in the film. Previously, Piscatella directed "#chicagoGirl: The Social Network Takes on a Dictator" (2013), about an American teenager in Chicago who helps coordinate the Syrian revolution. "#chicagoGirl" won the DOC U Award at the 2013 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam.

In addition to his directing work, Piscatella has written numerous feature scripts and television pilots for 20th Century Fox, Spyglass, and Touchstone Television. His credits include Disney's *Underdog*, Warner Bros.' *Ozzy & Drix* and NBC's *Stark Raving Mad*.

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The annual [Ridenhour Prizes](#) recognize those who persevere in acts of truth-telling that protect the public interest, promote social justice or illuminate a more just vision of society. [The Nation Institute](#) and the [Fertel Foundation](#) jointly co-founded The Ridenhour Prizes in 2003, and the strategic partners are the [Government Accountability Project](#), the [Project On Government Oversight](#), and the [Fund for Constitutional Government](#).