

## Respect My Red: My Movement to End Assault

By [Katie Koestner, Survivor, Activist, and Author](#)

### Content warning: Rape and sexual assault

“She’s totally asking for it. Look at what she’s wearing — a sexy, red dress.”

Have you ever heard someone say something like this? Maybe you’ve thought it about someone you saw wearing a short skirt and high heels to a party, a bar, or even just down the street. When did we start thinking that a sexy, red dress means “go” or indicates a “green light” in the world of intimacy?

As early as I can remember, I was told by my parents and teachers that red means “stop.” A red light, a red stop sign — these red signs aren’t a suggestion or recommendation that we stop. They *insist* that we stop. Red demands respect. Red is there for our safety, to protect us from danger. Red is universally recognized and means what it says. When you see red, you must wait until the light turns green. Red *never* means you should try to sneak through the intersection — even if you don’t see anyone around and don’t think anyone will catch you breaking the law.

I was 18 when the guy I liked decided not to respect my request that he stop — my “red.” I had made it clear to him that I was waiting until I was married, but he didn’t listen or wasn’t willing to wait.

I spoke out about what happened to me, and HBO made my story into a movie. For some reason, they decided to put my character in a short, red dress for that fated dinner date at a fancy restaurant. They didn’t show me wearing the conservative, black velvet dress that I wore in real life. Why this wardrobe change? What were they saying about me and my right to say “stop”? Did red not mean the same thing to them that it meant to me?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Each of these victims has been treated in such a way that their “red” was not respected.

I travel all over the United States sharing my personal story of how, at 18, my date treated me without respect and violated my “red.” I hope by sharing my story, I can inspire others to speak out and know they deserve respect, too. I want everyone to know that they have the right to be “red” until they’re ready to be “green.”

We should always feel respected. So, what if we started thinking of ourselves as “red”? What if we are all born “red” and everyone knows we are off limits by default? It doesn’t matter what we have done in the past, where we are, or what we are wearing. We get to choose when someone is allowed to touch us — when we want to be “green.”

But it’s not just about how we think of our own bodies. If we tell our daughters, nieces, sisters, or girlfriends to avoid wearing certain things so they “don’t send the wrong signal,” we are reinforcing the wrong message. And boys hear it, too. They hear that what a girl is wearing is more important than what she says, that maybe she doesn’t really mean “stop.” But our clothes don’t dictate our color — we do. Everyone should have the right to be “red” and should expect to be treated as “red” at any time, no matter what they are wearing.

Together, we can start to make this world a reality. Join with me to demand that others respect your “red” by taking a Red Selfie for the Respect My Red Campaign. Just take a photo, make it black and white, decorate it with red, and [share](#) it with us.

You can also join the conversation about Respect My Red on Thursday, March 3, 2016, at 9 p.m. ET with our workshop on relationships, romance, and respect. It’s open to all and free to attend. [Register](#) or learn more at [TakeBackTheNight.org](http://TakeBackTheNight.org).

***Katie Koestner appeared on the cover of TIME magazine at 18 as the first “date” rape victim to speak out. She is the subject of an HBO movie, has lectured at over 3,000 schools, and has appeared on Oprah, NBC, CNBC, CNN, Good Morning America, and dozens of other television programs.***

*The statements and opinions in this blog post are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health.*

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**We get to choose when someone is allowed to touch us.**

Katie Koestner, a date rape survivor, talks about changing the way we think about consent.

[Read the blog post]

**Images:**

