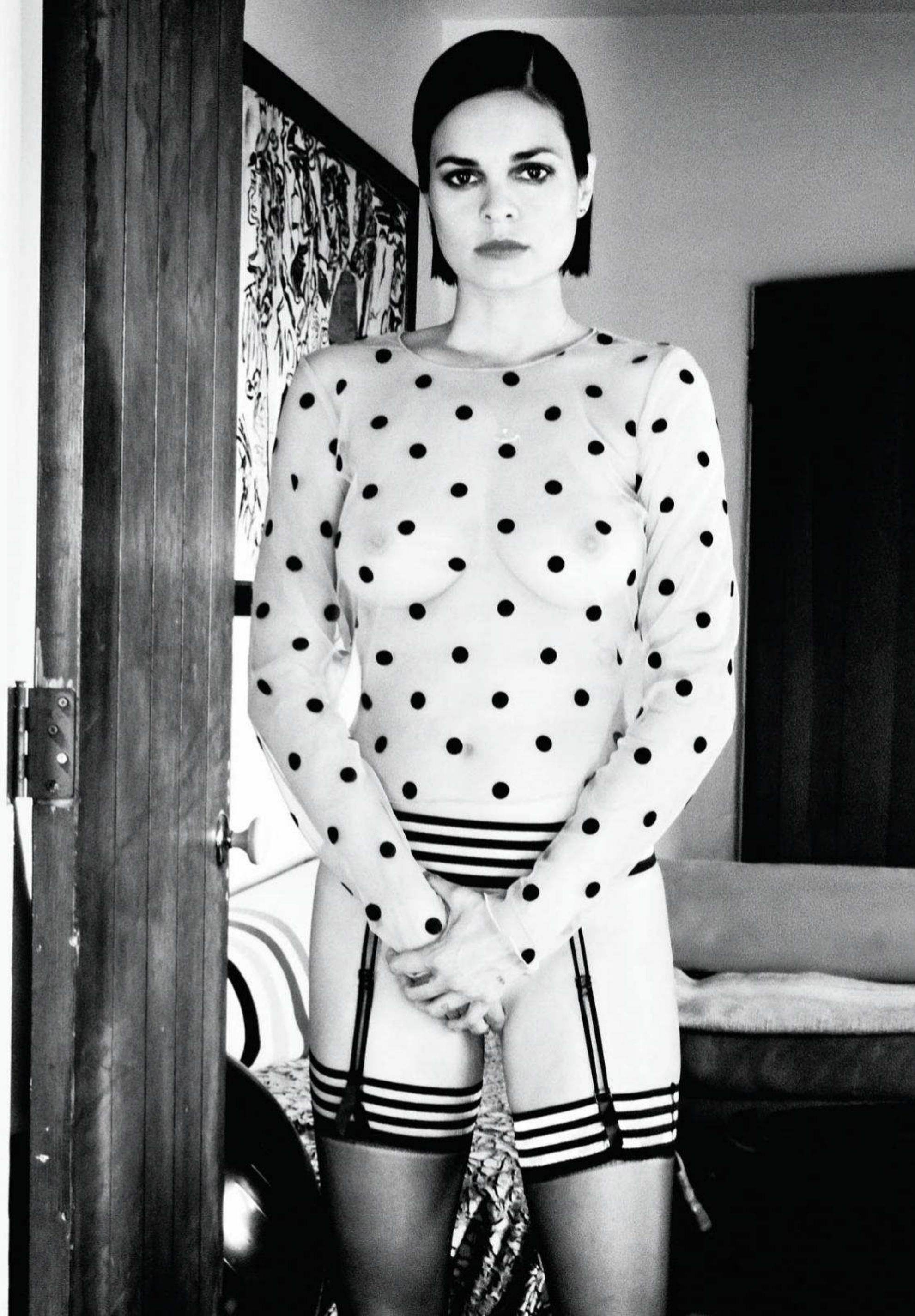


PLAYBOY PROFILE

DAWN OF A NEW ERA





Lina Esco captured the world's attention by asking women to free the nipple in the name of equality. Now she's calling on men to join her crusade to update the Constitution. Will it work?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ELLEN VON UNWERTH**

You might not know much about the Equal Rights Amendment, but you probably know plenty about Free the Nipple. The former was conceived by suffragist Alice Paul almost a century ago, after American women won the right to vote but still found themselves without gender-specific civil rights guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. The latter is a global phenomenon created

BY **JAMES RICKMAN**

by an actress and activist fed up with the double standards applied to nudity and perpetuated by state law and social media policy. The ERA has languished since the last major push toward its ratification in the early 1980s, and Free the Nipple remains one of the most viral memes of the past decade, supported by the likes of Kendall Jenner, Chrissy Teigen and Cara Delevingne. Despite their differences, these two movements converged two years ago when Free the Nipple creator Lina Esco (who also co-wrote, directed and starred in the 2014 movie of the same name) and a small bipartisan team launched the Human Campaign—an organization with a new take on getting women's full equality written into America's founding document.

“The biggest obstacle we had with Free the Nipple was that it was a very small umbrella; at first glance, people were always misunderstanding it,” Esco says, meeting with PLAYBOY at a breezy hotel restaurant in Beverly Hills. “The word *human* was so much more powerful. I believe that people don't want to be divided by race, they don't want to be divided by color, they don't want to be divided by gender. They want to come together.”

Esco has been in the film and TV world for more than a decade, having appeared on shows like *Flaked*, *Kingdom* and *Heroes: Destiny*. These days she's a principal cast member on CBS's *S.W.A.T.*, whose second season premiered in September. She arrives to our interview fresh from the boxing gym, dressed in ripped jeans and a faded Fugazi T-shirt, her chin-length hair framing a strong jawline and a pair of dark, searching eyes. The setting is

apt: Esco learned at an early age that when it comes to advocacy, show business can be as powerful as politics.

But calling out gender inequality by celebrating nudity is one thing; amending the Constitution is another—a fact that's not lost on Esco and her team. Consider again the differences between Free the Nipple and the Human Campaign: from specific to broad, from playful to serious, from gendered (in context, since men's nipples have been free for a while now) to all-inclusive. It's that last part that matters most to Esco. It is, she believes, the movement's leftward drift and its failure to engage men that have crippled the ERA. These are the flaws she aims to fix. All she has to do is build a few bridges—across the gender spectrum and the ever more abysmal political divide.

Most entertainers would be more comfortable making a donation, posting some strident lines on their socials and getting on with their lives. This one wants to unite a country that finds itself in the throes of a civil war.

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Lina Esco grew up poor in Miami, the child of a mother with dreams of being a painter and a father she describes as an “aspiring architect.” The latter gave Esco her first sense of inequality. “My father was completely...how can I describe it? Controlling, macho, type-A toward my mother at all times,” she says. “Telling her what to wear, how to act, while he and I would go out and he'd be checking out women and be completely obvious about it.”

The family's devout Catholicism posed its own challenges. In confession, Esco would argue with the man sitting on the other side of the lattice, asking why Adam and Eve were depicted with belly buttons and why the Bible referred to God as a “he.” Tensions with family and faith came to a head one day when her father invited people to the house and conducted a ritual involving scattered salt and a ring of fire on the floor. Esco, then 13, was placed in the middle. “I'm like, Wait, what? My father just put me in here because he thinks it's going to protect me and bring money to them? But I

went along with it; I was really young.” To this day, the memory baffles her.

With her mother's tacit support, Esco ran away from home in her mid-teens. She had already gotten into acid, weed and mushrooms. Soon enough, she was hooked on heroin. She couch-surfed, lived on the streets intermittently and drifted apart from her non-junkie friends. One day, messed up on something at the beach, Esco was approached by a woman who told her she should model. And with that, she found herself flying to Los Angeles, Paris and New York, barely old enough to drive but somehow building a career. She kicked heroin—no rehab or methadone, just five days of hell. She booked some commercials and reconnected with a zest for acting she'd discovered back in school. In 2005 she landed her first credit, appearing alongside Jessica Biel and Chris Evans in a film called *London*—just a few years after she'd been living on the streets. She was barely 20.

Most of this she relates from a couch in her trailer. It's two weeks after our first interview, and *S.W.A.T.* is shooting at a sun-baked lot in Santa Clarita, California. Esco has just wrapped for the day and is still wearing a tight black top and matching tactical pants. She speaks comfortably, letting her volume rise and fall as she probes the scars of her childhood, with a slight *Newsies* inflection you might not expect from a Miami native. She skips the fact that early in her acting career she produced and directed promos for *The Cove*, the 2009 Oscar-winning documentary about the slaughter of dolphins in Japanese waters, and that in addition to founding Free the Nipple, she helped Miley Cyrus launch the Happy Hippie Foundation. (Esco and Cyrus met while making the 2012 movie *LOL*.) As her career has developed, so has her activism.

Asked if she inherited any goodness from her father, she allows a rare pause. “No,” she says. “The only good thing I inherited is that without him being the way he was, and without all the bad things happening, I would have never run away from home. I would have never done the things I've done. And I would have



never done a film like *Free the Nipple* or tried to be a part of the gender-equality revolution.”

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Esco launched the Human Campaign in 2016 with the help of two unlikely allies: Johanna Maska, a former campaign operative and White House media director for President Barack Obama, and Katie Packer Beeson, who served as deputy campaign manager for Mitt Romney in his 2012 bid for the presidency. It quickly became part of a diverse and growing movement that includes the ERA Coalition, the Kamala Lopez film *Equal Means Equal* and the advocacy of celebrities including Meryl Streep, Alyssa Milano and Patricia Arquette.

The language of the ERA is simple; its path to ratification is anything but. The first and most important of the amendment’s three sections reads, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” The arguments against it range from the practical—the 14th Amendment promises “equal protection” to all citizens born or naturalized on American soil, though it’s also the first amendment to add specifically male language to the Constitution—to the cultural, as personified by ultraconservative consti-

tutional lawyer Phyllis Schlafly, who died in 2016. The ERA cleared both houses of Congress in the early 1970s, but thanks in part to Schlafly’s STOP ERA countermovement, it fell three states short of the necessary 38-state quorum at the time of its 1982 deadline. (These days, vocal ERA opponents are remarkably hard to come by outside the occasional op-ed piece; legal complexities aside, seemingly no one wants to be seen standing in the way of women’s rights.) Just this year, Illinois became the 37th state to ratify the amendment, but even after the 38th state signs on, a maze of legal challenges lies in wait.

Its advocates see the ERA as a constitutional high ground from which to close the gender pay gap, bring about greater representation in government and business, and fight sexual assault and harassment. And they see its benefits as universal, as you might expect from a movement whose direct and indirect supporters have ranged from Gloria Steinem and Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Richard Nixon and Antonin Scalia.

“When you bring the wife or the daughter or the mother into the picture,” Esco says, “it changes everything.”

Esco’s take on the 14th Amendment is that,

in case after case, it has simply not delivered equal protection. She cites *Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Dukes*, a Supreme Court case in which a greeter employed by the big-box giant unsuccessfully sued for equal pay and treatment for male and female workers. But even defenders of the 14th see the merits of a newer amendment that specifically protects women.

“My argument would be that 14 plus 19 equals ERA,” says Akhil Amar, a Yale law professor and constitutional scholar, citing the 1920 amendment that granted women the right to vote. Speaking with *PLAYBOY* a week before testifying at the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, Amar argues that there is value in the ERA—even if that value is more declaratory than practical. “I’m for it less because I think it would actually work big changes in legal doctrine but more because I would like to get everyone mobilized around this idea,” he says. “I think it would be good for women, and for women of this generation to do it themselves rather than merely inherit it from their foremothers.”

Why this generation? Three factors suggest themselves. One, Esco, born a year after Mark Zuckerberg, proved via *Free the Nipple* that she has the innate social media savvy



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common to people her age. Two, the war on terror, the Great Recession and the protests against both underscored her generation's transition into adulthood. Three, with the rise of President Donald Trump—in particular his “locker-room talk” and alleged history of sexual assault—it's hard to remember a time when activism had so much raw fuel and powerful tools all at once.

“When I was growing up there was no talk of women's empowerment,” says Esco's *Free the Nipple* co-star Lola Kirke. “The Spice Girls were *Spice Girls*, and they were adult women. ‘Girl power’ was the closest we got to it, but that was still couched in some kind of patriarchy. The way we consider gender is being overhauled in a massive way, and I think Lina is an agent of that.”

The time may be right for the Human Campaign, but whether its approach will finally get the ERA passed remains to be seen. No moral cause exists in a vacuum, and Esco's commitment to inclusivity was tested when she found herself swept up in another movement, thanks to another insecure and volatile man.

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Last fall, a particular *Free the Nipple* credit—“very special thanks”—prompted a reporter from *The Washington Post* to contact Esco, who became part of a wide-ranging article titled “Violence. Threats. Begging. Harvey Weinstein's 30-Year Pattern of Abuse in Hollywood.” It ran just days into the cultural cataclysm that birthed the #MeToo movement. Compressed into approximately 300 words, Esco's Weinstein story runs like this: “Around 2010,” they meet through a mutual friend. Later, Weinstein invites her to dinner, and during that dinner he says, “I think we should see a movie in the theater, like back in the day, and we should kiss.” Esco declines, despite Weinstein's implying that accepting his advances would make things “easier” for her, and writes it off as a typical power play by a creepy man. While making *Free the Nipple*, she hits him up for help finding a film editor. All true, but while Weinstein's motives are clear enough in the article, Esco's are not.

“I didn't go and search for that story,” she tells *PLAYBOY*. “I didn't go searching to talk about what happened to me. I believe my story wasn't strong enough compared to the other women's. I'd been raped twice before I was 18, so this stuff that happened with me and Harvey was nothing in my eyes. In no way or shape was I trying to be a victim.”

Retracing the story in her trailer, she describes that first encounter as “two film geeks talking about shots in movies.” Months later,



she received an out-of-the-blue text—an invitation to meet Weinstein at a restaurant within the Peninsula, another swanky Beverly Hills hotel. Emerging from a boxing-gym workout, dressed in sweats and sneakers, she thought, Fuck it, I'll go. She knew, of course, that Weinstein was a valuable friend for an emerging Hollywood talent to have. She was unaware of the allegations that would burst into the public record a few years later.

So she joined him at the restaurant. Then, out of nowhere, came Weinstein's proposition. "And he just would not let it go," she says. "He was so aggressive about it." Eventually, Esco got up and left.

A couple of years later, *Free the Nipple* was in the can—but barely. The project had spooked Esco's agents, who dropped her, and many others mistook the film for pornography. Money problems and canceled locations in New York City found Esco in the editing room, thinking, I'm a million dollars deep and I don't have a fucking film. A producer suggested that Esco call on Weinstein. "I was like, Fuck it! That fucking guy insulted me like that, disrespected me? Fuck that. I'm gonna use him now." She texted Weinstein, and within minutes his secretary connected Esco to Matt Landon, one of Weinstein's longtime editors, who stepped in and helped her finish the film. Hence the very special thanks for Weinstein.

"It's not like he asked for it," she says. "I did not forget what he did to me, but I turned it around."

The *Post* article allows the interpretation that Esco simply ditched her morals the minute they stood in the way of her career. But Esco has a different take, one that's more consistent with the rest of her story. "If *The Washington Post* had never contacted me, I would've never said anything. There was no need. In my eyes, I walked away from that, and I was like, He's just a fucking pig. That's it. I walked away from it."

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As it happens, Esco tells PLAYBOY this story days after sexual-assault allegations emerged against Asia Argento, one of Weinstein's earliest accusers. Although she won't judge Argento's innocence or guilt, Esco has always sensed that "this can happen to men *and* women." She gives you the sense that a successful movement must be broad enough to account for human error, to welcome radically different ideas on how to reach a common goal, to include people who could be mistaken for the enemy. Hence the *human* in the Human Campaign. It's an invitation to look past differences, as painful as that may be.

"The only reason women's movements and



feminist movements continue to not move forward fast enough is because of the exclusion of men," Esco says. "It's because of the pointing of fingers. We're wasting our time on things that are not important, and we need to come together."

Instead of marches, Esco and her partners plan to chart inroads through government and academia, red states and blue, facilitating conversations while delving into the political process. "Education, communication, conversations," she says. "When you watch people really listen, no matter what your point of view is, people's guards go down."

When those conversations turn to the perceived redundancies between the 14th Amendment and the ERA, a moving case can be made for constitutional evolution. "We talk about amendments," says Akhil Amar. "I believe these are making amends for some of the sins and lapses of earlier generations. I don't think history is always progress. We went from Obama to Trump—that's not progress. But look at the amendments: Almost every amendment, with the exception of Prohibition, which was quickly repealed, is a genuine making of amends. It's an improvement. They add to liberty and equality. That's a pretty extraordinary arc, and the ERA would beautifully fit."

The Human Campaign is in its early stages. Its success will require a major bipartisan con-

sensus both among the electorate and within the government, where the amendment's lapsed deadline would need to be challenged. If Esco is daunted, she doesn't show it. She has spent half her life fighting for a kinder, more equitable world.

So why was she surprised when a Harvard University administrator asked her if she had ever thought of running for office? "I'm like, Never going to happen. I've done a lot of crazy shit in my life. I was doing heroin when I was like 17. I dropped out of high school." The administrator replied, "It doesn't matter. Look who's our president now."

Our president makes several appearances during our conversation in Esco's trailer. She keeps CNN on throughout the day, and this particular day is a big one for Trump's former attorney Michael Cohen, who has just claimed that, at his client's instruction, he paid hush money to porn star Stephanie Clifford and PLAYBOY Playmate Karen McDougal.

The president's proclivities are, of course, familiar territory to Lina Esco: She freed herself from her father, survived sexual assault and, in her own way, settled the score with Weinstein—all before turning 30. And though anger is never far from the surface when Esco speaks, anger does not define her. Her openness in a clenched and divided age may just give the ERA the final push it so urgently needs. ■