



Rolf Harris.

SHOCK CLAIMS

ROLF HARRIS ABUSED ME

Aussie mother Tonya Lee has stepped forward with claims that she was sexually assaulted as a child by the iconic entertainer. Now she wants him charged. **FIONA CONNOLLY and NAOMI TOY report**

Tonya Lee weeps for the 14-year-old she once was and wonders how differently her life might have turned out. She cries quietly for that teenage girl who had so much promise, so much passion, but whose dreams died, she says, when she was allegedly subjected to a sexual assault by the iconic Australian entertainer Rolf Harris.

"Maybe if I had said something earlier, life would have been different for me but I'm here now and this is my chance to tell my story," she told *Woman's Day* in an extraordinary interview.

Tonya, a 42-year-old bank manager from NSW and mother of three young children, is unburdening herself of the secret she's been carrying inside for 27 years. She has gone to police with shocking allegations against the now 83-year-old - events she says took place in London in 1986.

She is the only woman to publicly identify herself as a victim of the entertainer, forced to speak out now, she says, because once she made contact with police earlier this month, she was suddenly swamped by TV and newspaper reporters.

"The phone hasn't stopped ringing, our neighbours are being approached - plus, I am now emotionally ready to tell my story," Tonya explains.

Harris, who lives in England, has been questioned there in relation to separate allegations, but released without charge.

He has declined to comment publicly about those allegations but is understood to vehemently deny any wrongdoing.

Trip of a lifetime

In 1986, Tonya was an aspiring singer and had been a member of her local youth theatre group in Sydney's Carlton for about four years. She was one of 12 chosen from the group to go on a six-week tour to the UK in about May 1986, accompanied by three directors. They were aged between 14 and 25.

Her mother, a strict Catholic, didn't want her to go, worried about the appropriateness of the older ones mixing with the younger ones.

"She was always a bit paranoid about something happening to her children," recalls Tonya. "She's an Irish Catholic and she was brought up in that sort of environment where a lot of funny things went on and I think she was

really hyper vigilant for her own children.

"But I bugged her and bugged her. As a single mum, she didn't have much money, so I worked for hours and hours saving up enough spending money.

It was such an opportunity. I'd never been overseas and my dream was to go to America and become a star.

"Eventually, she gave in and off I went."

Tonya says she was so excited she hardly slept on the flight to London. When they hit Heathrow, they were surprised to find Rolf Harris - a friend of tour director Cathy Henkel - and his wife waiting to welcome them to London.

"I hadn't met any celebrities - it was really exciting," Tonya says of that first introduction.

At Ms Henkel's invitation, Harris, then 56, joined them later that night at a pub, and the group relaxed with a sing-a-long and a chat.



Long-time entertainer



Hopeful teen

thinking, 'What the hell is happening?'

"I just was shocked.

I didn't know what to do.

He was still talking and he was still including me in the conversation, but his hand then went in between my legs and went up inside my skirt and towards my vagina."

But little did Tonya realise that the most terrifying part was yet to come.

Scared, she left and went to the bathroom where she attempted to compose herself and rationalise what had happened. She questioned herself as to whether it had even happened.

But when Tonya left the bathroom, she alleges Rolf was waiting at the door.

"He sort of got me with my back against the wall and he went to give me a hug. He put his hand down my top and started to play with my breasts and then put it down my skirt and into my tights.

"He was touching me and all that kind of stuff. He put his finger inside me. He didn't do it for long and he was really quick.

"I was freaked out, I didn't know what to do and I felt really, really scared at that stage. Then he just finished and hugged me and I know he said something but I can't remember exactly

Ms Henkel declined to comment when contacted by *Woman's Day* about this story. But Tonya recalls this night in vivid detail and with a sense of dread.

Terrifying moment

"I remember the old-fashioned pub - not dingy, but worn and old. It had a sort of homely feel with crimson wallpaper and tables with bench seats."

It was on one of these bench seats that Tonya recalls the moment that would change the course of her life.

She was dressed in a duffel coat, top, skirt and tights when Rolf complimented her on her singing and requested that she come and sit on his lap.

"I remember that he had his legs together and I was sitting sort of on his lap but with my legs apart," she claims.

"At the time I didn't realise what was happening. But he started rubbing against me - not overtly so people would notice, but I could feel something happening.

"But everyone was still talking and conversing, just like normal, nothing changed. Then I could feel his hand start to move down my leg and I felt it go onto my thigh and I was

Pictures: AP, Newspix



Tonya Lee: "I know this is the right thing to do."



Tonya and her loving family.



She was a budding star.



“WHEN I SAW HIM AGAIN I FELT SCARED, AND I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, ‘I NEED TO STAY AWAY FROM YOU.’”

immensely and I didn't want to do that to her," Tonya says.

She soon developed an eating disorder, the first of several obsessive behaviours she would

battle for the next 20 years.

"I was throwing up several times a day and exercising for hours at a time. I started taking mum's thyroid tablets to speed up my metabolism and ended up in hospital," she says.

"When you can't talk about something you need to, you find ways of distracting yourself. You end up obsessed about something else. That was the way I did it anyway, and I did it for about 20 years."

Tonya worked relentlessly at two jobs, became fitness-obsessed, finished two degrees, and became fixated on child sexual assault cases.

A troubled sleeper since her return from the trip, she subsequently developed insomnia and turned to alcohol to help her sleep.

"My relationship at the time was not good and I started having flashbacks," Tonya explains.

"It felt like a feeling of someone engulfing me. I was in a corner and someone was engulfing me. A sheer terror. I wasn't reliving the actual thing - I didn't see his face - but this was the feeling.

"This is when I acknowledged what happened [with Rolf Harris] for the first time and couldn't hide it anymore."

Psychologically tormented, Tonya attempted suicide. Thankfully, she ended up in hospital.

"I was just really tired of being here and having to work so hard at living. I didn't have kids then, and obviously feel differently now."

First steps to change

Despite never wanting to have children, Tonya was delighted when she fell pregnant with her son, who is now 5, and then her twins, a boy and girl, three years ago. But childbirth triggered something in her.

"I had my little girl and realised how vulnerable and innocent they are. I found it hard to change her nappies and bath her," she confesses.

This was the point at which Tonya

UK child sex abuse inquiry

Rolf Harris has been arrested and questioned but not charged as part of the Operation Yewtree abuse inquiry in the UK. The investigation began after claims made against the late BBC TV star Jimmy Savile, who police say committed hundreds of assaults dating back decades. However, the allegations against Harris are not linked to Savile. Other celebrities arrested in the case include singer Gary Glitter and comedian Freddie Starr. They all deny any wrongdoing.

believe me? Did I do something? How will I get home?

"We'd just come all this way and I felt like I was going to ruin everything. I thought they would hate me.

"And I felt guilty as well. I thought I must have done something. And my mum wasn't rich so she wouldn't have been able to fly me back home earlier."

Tonya says she saw Rolf twice more during the tour. At the end of the tour he came to a show in London, congratulating her backstage on her performance, and he came to see them off at the airport.

"When I saw him again, I just felt yucky, definitely scared, and I thought to myself, 'I need to stay away from you.' So I made sure I was with people.

"He was just the same as he always was, acted like nothing had happened. I'm not the sort of person that would cause a fuss and go up to him or say anything."

When she returned to Australia not only was she 6kg lighter, but it was clear to her family a different child had returned. While her mum suspected something was wrong she still couldn't tell her what had happened.

"I know it would have affected my mum

→ what it was. It wasn't a threat or anything like that. Then he just left.

"I went back into the ladies' room, just shut myself into the toilets and I sat down on the toilet. I was just really scared. I didn't know what to do, and then I started crying. I really wanted my mum. I wanted to talk to my mum.

"I just felt so far away."

Scared and alone, Tonya says she quite simply didn't know what to do. And so in the end, she did nothing.

Holding in the pain

As *Woman's Day* sits with a tearful but composed Tonya, probing as to why she didn't say anything at the time, she pauses, thinking hard before simply responding: "I just couldn't. I didn't know what to do."

She says she certainly thought about telling someone but she didn't have the answers to the questions her 14-year-old mind threw at her: What will people think? What if they don't



→ resolved to finally face the reasons she had been so lost in life.

She contacted a Victims of Crime group and sought counselling, which she says has brought her to the point of being able to tell her story publicly.

Until Harris was named last month as being under investigation by Scotland Yard for sexual assaults, Tonya had only mentioned the abuse twice outside of counselling – the first time to her brother and sister in an off-handed remark as they were watching TV in 2006. “He’s a kiddy fiddler,” she exclaimed, surprising herself.

“I just blurted it out. I tried to cover it up then and changed the topic and they didn’t really ask me more.”

Two years later, in 2008, she was watching TV with her now-husband, when she finally came clean: “When I was in England, that man molested me.”

Speaking out

Still, she was not ready to divulge the full details until two weeks ago when she saw in Sydney’s *The Daily Telegraph* that Scotland Yard investigators were in Australia.

She called the *Telegraph* to get a contact number but they were unable to help, so she contacted police in Wollongong and made an appointment to see detectives the following day.

“That night we kept getting calls from the paper and TV reporters started calling,” she says.

“My husband suggested we call Max Markson as he’s the only name we knew that would help us deal with this kind of thing.”

They moved into a hotel that night to avoid the media but still wanting to speak to Scotland Yard first, she called Crime Stoppers, who transferred them to London. She told her story and within 15 minutes was contacted by Scotland Yard, who interviewed her at length, telling her how helpful she had been to their investigation.

Finally feeling that someone had believed her, she made a call she had been dreading for more than two decades: to her mum.

But Tonya didn’t have to say a word. “Tonya, that was you wasn’t it?” her mum said, referring to TV reports of a Wollongong woman interviewed over the Rolf scandal.

“There was relief on both sides. It had been unspoken between us for so many years. She called [Harris] a ‘bloody bastard’, but she told me to stay strong, that Irish people are strong,” Tonya says, now crying.

“I feel like I’ve been crying all the time the last couple of days!” she adds, finally managing a smile.

As we sit with Tonya during our second interview, she remains composed when recounting the alleged assault. But when asked about the personal cost to her life, she is unable to stop the tears.

“I lost so much of my life and I look back at that girl... who had so much drive and passion and ambition and hope. I was still trying to

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pursue acting but something had changed. I no longer felt good enough.

“That’s why I wish I would have spoken up sooner. I feel so angry that [the alleged assault] changed the direction of my life.

“I’ve been hesitant to talk – to talk to police, to talk to anyone – because, you know, it’s going to hurt people. I just know that for my life, he changed it so dramatically that all these years later I feel like a failure and all the other times I’ve felt really, just really, without hope.

“And I kind of think, ‘What would I have been like if that didn’t happen. No-one will ever really know. I can’t help but wonder.’”

Learning to let go

Tonya says she has told police she is prepared to give evidence if asked.

And she’s finally promised herself to let go of the “anger and hatred I’ve felt towards him.”



How to get help

For 24-hour crisis, information and counselling support for adult survivors of child sexual abuse call 1800 737 732 to talk to someone immediately. The counselling is also available for victim’s friends and/or family members. Visit 1800respect.org.au for more information.

“I now know that’s its not productive for me to continue hating. I guess there is still a bit there, that’s never going to go away, but at the end of the day, he’ll read this and if he can look inside himself and realise that something that was just a blip on the radar for him has had life changing consequences... He has to sit down and live with himself at the end of the day.

“Only two people know what went on: Rolf Harris and me. I don’t think he’s going to come out and admit it – he’s denied everything until now.”

When we ask whether she feels she will be criticised for selling her story, she replies, “People may be cynical, but this did happen and this is the truth. If I come forward, others might, and hopefully he’ll be charged.

“I know this is the right thing to do.”