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Mayor Pro Tem Tonya Burke Finalist for National Award

Perris Mayor Pro Tem Tonya Burke is a finalist for a national award from the group Emerge America, which encourages women to run for and win public offices, effect public policy and improve the lives of disenfranchised residents in their communities.

Burke, who was elected to the City Council last year, is the only candidate for the Emerging Leader award from California and one of six nationally.

Burke said she "quite shocked" when she learned her of nomination, adding that "it is a great honor to be considered from among thousands of other women."

The Emerging Leader Award goes to "a woman on the rise" and someone destined to make a major impact, according to the Emerge America website. The organization has affiliates in 16 states.

Emerge California executive director Kimberly Ellis described Burke as "humble, gracious, committed and determined."

"She is a class act," Ellis said. "Tonya is a true public servant. She has a servant's heart. She is a role model for current women in public office and for those considering running for public office. She is committed to serving."

Ellis said Burke seeks to "give voice to the voiceless" and uses the prestige and influence of her office "to do good for others." The Emerging Leader award represents the top award from Emerge America.

"It's the best of their network," Ellis said. "It's the equivalent of the Oscars."

The winner will receive the award in a Nov. 16 ceremony in San Francisco.



Perris Mayor Pro Tem Tonya Burke, pictured here as she is sworn into office in 2014 by her daughter, Brianna, is one of six finalists for the Emerging Leader award from the group Emerge America.

Burke said she did not seek public office for personal honors, adding that representing the City means many nights and weekends away from family.

Sitting in front of an audience on the Council dais has helped her gain insight and perspective as she and her City Council colleagues address challenges facing the community. She sits on numerous council boards and regional commissions, including the Department of Community Action, the Riverside Transit Agency, the Ways and Means Committee, the Public Safety Ad Hoc Committee and the Economic Ad Hoc Committee.

Burke said is pleased that since taking office 12 months ago, Perris has created three new citizen committees—to aid municipal staff and elected officials in the areas of beautification, community and economic development. She also excited that the City is creating a community garden at its D Street Campus.

"We are increasing community engagement through the commissions," she said. "We are reaching out to get more people involved in the community to make a better place."

She said serving on a City Council that includes retirees, former business owners, veterans and married people with young families has taught her the art of compromise.

"You have to acknowledge and work with other people even if you do not always agree with them," Burke said. "We have a diverse City Council by age, race, experience and educational background. That diversity leads to creativity as we address issues in order for our City to grow. We have a City Council that works well together and I have enjoyed every moment."

Burke works as a Senior Vocational Counselor with the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), where her clients include veterans, teens and adults with disabilities and ex-offenders.

Recently, she has expanded her work with the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE), Perris Union High School and Val Verde Unified School Districts by counseling students and helping them obtain the skills needed for meaningful careers.



Perris Mayor Pro Tem Tonya Burke at the principal's desk during a visit to Lakeside Middle School in March.

Burke received her Bachelor's Degree in psychology from UC, Santa Cruz and a Master's Degree in clinical psychology from Pepperdine University. She is pursuing a PhD in industrial and organizational psychology from Walden University, where her dissertation focuses on cyberbullying within the workplace and through social media.

"There's not a lot of research in that area," she said. "Adults don't often realize they are victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying. It can have physiological and psychological impacts. For instance, negative postings on social media can affect people mentally and physically."

Another of Burke's great passion is comforting the victims of domestic abuse, which she personally experienced. She said victims often feel isolated and ashamed and are afraid to report the crime or take advantage of counseling and other services.

While encouraging victims to make use of all available resources, including law enforcement, social and family services, Burke said often times a visit from a friend, a quiet moment, expression of support or prayer can begin the healing process.

"It's important to be with them, pray with and for them," she said.

Burke and her husband, Jason, have three children, Devon, Brianna and Jaylyn. She attends Crossword Christian Church and enjoys teaching Zumba and reading.

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