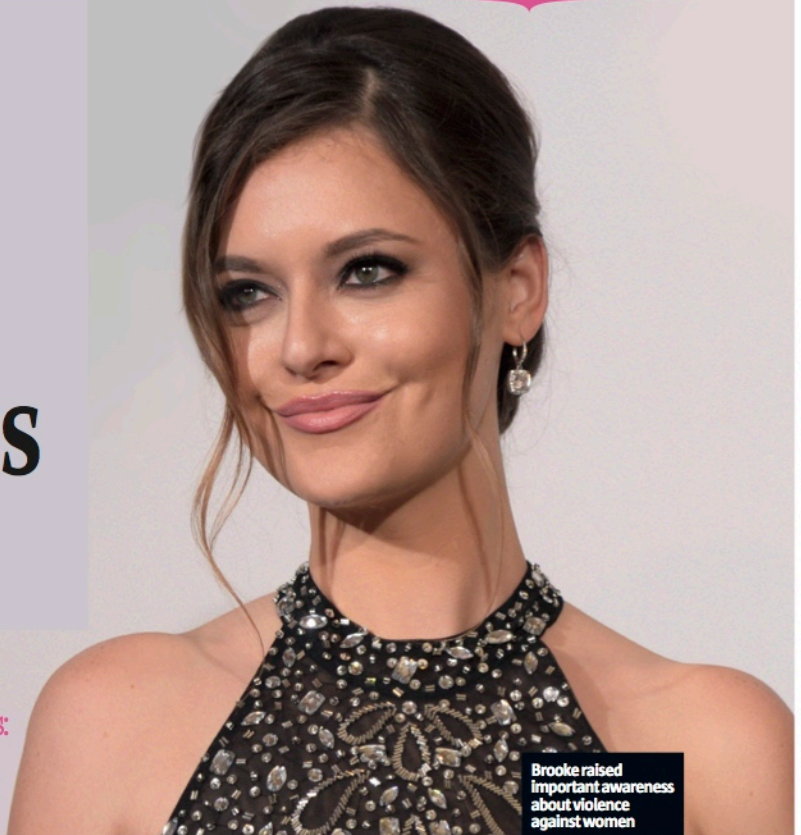


Her Story Moved Hundreds Of A-listers To Tears

Forget the awards and celebs – all eyes were on just one woman at this year's Grammys: 34-year-old domestic abuse survivor Brooke Axtell



Brooke raised important awareness about violence against women

As Katy Perry took to the stage at this year's Grammys, the auditorium – once loud with the buzz of A-listers – was silent. But it wasn't Katy who had the celeb audience mesmerised – a little-known poet and activist called Brooke Axtell had been handed the microphone seconds before

the singer's performance. Brooke, 34 – a victim of domestic abuse – shared her story, encouraging other victims to seek help and reducing the A-list audience to tears.

After a year of passionate romance with a handsome, charming man, I was stunned when he began to abuse me,' Brooke said in her speech. 'I believed he was lashing out because he was in pain and needed help... what bound me to him was my desire to heal him.'

Brooke first suffered abuse when she was raped by a group of strangers at the age of seven. Traumatized by the experience, she carried the secret into adulthood when she again became a victim of violence – this time at the hands of her boyfriend. 'I was terrified of him and ashamed I was in this position,' Brooke recalls. When he threatened to kill her, she told her mum, who put her in touch with a shelter. Her recovery took time, but Brooke has since founded Survivor Healing + Empowerment (SHE) – a group that supports survivors of rape, abuse and sex trafficking. And through her work, she attracted the attention of Ken Ehrlich, executive producer of the Grammys, who invited her to kick off Katy Perry's performance. 'Ken said

“**What bound me to him was my desire to heal him. I was terrified**”

they want to find ways to give their musicians and performing artists a platform to speak about issues that are important to them,' explains Brooke. 'Last year they addressed gay marriage and this year they wanted it to be violence against women.'

Brooke was told to write something that was then sent to Katy's team, who loved what she'd done. 'They wanted to see if we'd be a good match. I think it's clear from the song that Katy [chose] to perform that she's had an experience in her life where she felt devastated by a relationship.'

The pair first met just days before the awards show, where they decided how the performance would work. Despite all eyes being on her, Brooke kept her cool. 'I'll be thinking of the survivors I've worked with,' she said in an interview with Slate.com ahead of her powerful speech. 'I'll try not to focus on the fact that Beyoncé and Madonna are sitting right there.'

■ *If you're experiencing domestic abuse, or are worried about someone who is, call The National Domestic Violence Helpline on 0808 2000 247.*



Brooke delivered her powerful message on stage



Katy Perry then followed, singing *By The Grace Of God*

WORDS: CAROLINANNES PHOTOS: BARCKROFT MEDIA, GETTY IMAGES, PA PHOTOS