Proud Mary

Mary Fisher, the genteel socialite who rocked the infamous 1992 Republican National Convention, talks about her life, her political party, her kids and what it means to be the planet's most famous mommy with AIDS.

October 1, 1994 By Maureen Dowd

A couple of years ago, my friend Jeffrey Schmalz told me I should get to know Mary Fisher. Jeff was a brilliant New York Times editor and reporter who began writing extensively about AIDS after he learned he had the disease. He had met Fisher in 1992, when he went to interview her at her home in Boca Raton, Florida, while she was preparing the speech that would rock the Republican Convention, telling the story of her own HIV infection to challenge the affluent, white, heterosexual crowd to quit taking refuge in stereotypes, to stop killing "with our ignorance, our prejudice and our silence."

Jeff Schmalz was skeptical about Fisher at first, wondering if she was a dilettante heiress who was allowing herself to be used as the AIDS poster girl by a political party that he felt had done little to fight the disease or provide moral leadership.

His story in the Times reflected that skepticism. "Mary Fisher is right out of Republican central casting -- the Muffy-Buffy-Jody look writ expensive." He noted drily that she "lived in a guarded, gated enclave of multimillion-dollar houses," that she called Elizabeth Taylor and Magic Johnson by their fiest names and that she had easy access to the Oval Office. President Bush was an old friend of her father, Max Fisher, the enormously wealthy Detroit real estate investor who had been the top party fundraiser and an adviser to Republican presidents since Richard Nixon.

But several months later, Jeff was urging me to meet Fisher; he said they had been hanging out at her father's posh apartment at the Sherry Netherland in New York City. "I've gotten to know her," he said. "She's fun. You'd like her."

I remember thinking what an incongruous pair they made, those two who would never have crossed paths except for the terrible disease they shared: The rich, cloistered Republican mom with pearls and my hip, sardonic, liberal, urban gay friend. Mary and Jeff at the Sherry.

When I finally met Mary recently, long after Jeff's death in November of 1993, I told her of this recollection.

She remembered Jeff's initial resistance. And she remembered, later, calling him for advice about

what to say in speeches, what would make a difference. And she talked about what he had gone through at the end, when they were very close. And she put the back of her hand up to wipe her tears away.

“Sometimes that happens and I’m sorry,” she said.

I was in the hall of the Republican Convention in Houston when Mary Fisher gave that gently searing speech. Amid all the nasty, divisive conservative rhetoric—from Patrick Buchanan’s call for a cultural war to Marilyn Quayle’s plaint that women do not want to be separated from their essential natures—Fisher floated onto the stage like a Christmas angel with her message of tolerance and forgiveness.

As her father and Georgette Mosbacher and Gerald Ford and many others in the audience cried, she told the hushed crowd: “Though I am female and contracted this disease in marriage, and enjoy the warm support of my family, I am one with the lonely gay man sheltering a flickering candle from the cold wind of his family’s rejection.... People with AIDS have not entered some alien state of being. They are human. They have not earned cruelty and they do not deserve meanness.” You could tell from the expressions on the faces of many of the bouffant, tailored Republican women on the floor that this was the first time it had entered their minds that they could possibly be at risk. It was not a pretty thought.

From far up on stage, wearing her black dress, with the glittering red ribbon pinned on her wide white collar, Fisher looked tall and cool and elegant, like Grace Kelly.

In person, however, she turned out to be Sandra Dee. She saunters out of her house in Bethesda, a Maryland suburb of Washington, without make-up. She is tiny, 5-foot-1, tan, glowingly plump and bubbling with energy. Her long blond mane is pulled back haphazardly with a hair clip and she is wearing black biking pants, white Reeboks and a blue polo shirt the color of her eyes. She does not look like a 46-year-old whose life is scarred with Humpty-Dumpty cracks, she looks like the varsity hockey player she once was.

Her large house is a suburban dream, set back in an expensive, woodsy enclave. There is a basketball hoop outside and a late-model Lincoln in the garage. The sunny kitchen is full of glass jars of Sunmaid raisins and oatmeal cookies. The walls are covered with large color photographs that she has taken of her two preternaturally photogenic sons, the brown-haired Max, 6, and the tow-headed Zack, 4.

She flops down on a couch in her elegant living room that is covered with a pattern reminiscent of the Animal Crackers box. “I love animals,” she says, running her hand over an elephant.

She has moved to Washington from Florida to be closer to the political action and because she thinks the community and schools will be better for her sons.

In the two years since she became celebrated as “the Republican woman with AIDS,” she has founded the Family AIDS Network, a support group for family members, health care providers and

organizations that help PWAs. She has also published a book of her own speeches, called Sleep with the Angels: A Mother Challenges AIDS. She still travels around the country, trying to rip away “the shroud of silence,” as she calls it, so that her children will not have to grow up feeling stigmatized and embarrassed by the illness she contracted from her husband, Brian Campbell, an artist and jewelry designer who died of AIDS with Mary at his side a year ago. She focuses her efforts on teenagers and women and other groups that might not realize they are vulnerable.

The woman who changed the face of AIDS is starting an autobiography in which she will talk about how the disease has changed her. She takes me to her studio, a small, separate building outside the house, to show me one of the most dramatic changes she’s undergone -- her art.

Before, Fisher worked in handmade paper, sculpting pigmented pulp to form floral paintings, innocent pastels that are stacked in her living room.

The studio is now alive with burning colors and words, collage-type pieces made with handmade paper and computer blow-ups of photographs of her and her children and words from her speeches and journal.

The messages are typical Fisher, blunt without being vitriolic: I realize that hatred and meanness are cherished values in some quarters; I am not less worthy as a person because I have AIDS and I am no less a woman.

“This process was taught to me by Brian before he died,” she says softly. “Reporters were always asking me why my art wasn’t more angry after I got AIDS. I resented those questions. I would say, ’What does AIDS look like?’ They thought it should be black and it should be red and it should be angry. I said, ’I’m not angry.’ It’s taken me this long. It’s time for me to make some statements,” she says.

“Mary brings a feminine force, a maternal fierceness, into AIDS that hasn’t been there before,” says friend Torie Osborn. “She has an extraordinary radiance, like a healer. I call her the socialite turned shaman. And this pretty Republican package with the pearls knows how to cut the crap. She has great political instincts and a great bullshit detector.”

Torie Osborn said she witnessed her quiet force recently at Mary Fisher’s Maryland home when Max Fisher, visiting his republican daughter, said that Republican Mitt Romney could beat Edward Kennedy in the Massachusetts Senate race this year.

“She told her father, ’We need Kennedy in the Senate. Don’t think you’re going to turn me around on this.’”

Her father tried to placate her by telling her he was going to write a big check to her foundation.

“How much?” Mary asked her father.

“Fifty thousand dollars,” he replied.

“That’s a good start, Dad,” she said.

Even the very hard-to-please Larry Kramer adores her. “We’re just two Jewish girls. I don’t know, we hit it off from the beginning,” he said, interrupting a vacation in Switzerland to speak about Fisher. “She goes after a different market, a population that’s not going to pay attention to whatever I say, no matter what. I think this has given her life energy and meaning -- not to be too corny about it. I feel really well-used by life and fate and I think she does, too. I remember what life was like before and I don’t want to go back to it. This is like war. We both feel that way.”

Her appearance at the 1992 Republican Convention had been the culmination of a lot of soul-searching. Her privileged cocoon had shattered nearly a year earlier with two phone calls. Her former husband, Brian, had called to tell her he had tested positive for HIV. He told her that he believed it had been a result of IV drug use in the late 70s or early 80s. On July 17, two weeks after her tests went to the laboratory under the name “Cher” to assure her privacy, she had called her doctor to find out that she, too, had tested positive. She got the news at a pay phone in New York City’s LaGuardia Airport, with her two children playing nearby, as she waited with her brother, Philip, for a flight to join their parents on a yacht called Easy to Love in the French Riviera.

She went ahead with the trip, saying a tearful good-bye to her sons, so that she could break the news to her parents in person before she returned to have her son, Max, tested. (Max tested negative. Zack, who is adopted, didn’t need to be tested.)

“It was difficult for Mary, because she had always been the proper little girl, not wanting to reflect badly on our parents,” recalled Fisher’s brother, Philip. “She never got into trouble. She understood innately what it took for her to conform to what they needed her to be.”

Philip said that when they came on the boat, their mother, Marjorie, knew instantly. She had known that Mary was getting tested and all she needed was one look. “As soon as Mary stepped foot on the boat and Mother saw her face, she just started crying,” he said. “Mother and Mary have been very close forever.”

The two women had fought a disease together once before. Mrs. Fisher had gone to the Betty Ford Clinic a decade earlier to conquer her alcoholism and, in the course of family counseling, Mary had realized that she had also become overly fond of wine and vodka. She went through the program, too.

The day after she arrived on the yacht, Fisher and her mom summoned the courage to tell the patriarch of the family about Mary’s HIV status. After a stunned moment of silence, he hugged and kissed his daughter and told her he was behind her 100 percent and would do whatever he could do. When the senior Fishers went to bed that night, Max said to Marjorie, “I am amazed you didn’t have a drink.”

“I never even thought about it,” Marjorie replied.

Max Fisher was not accustomed to the feeling of helplessness that washed over him. He had been

a kingmaker, able to control big events, fix things that went wrong.

“It’s the one thing you can’t fix,” Marjorie says. “Everything was out of our hands.”

Sailing in the Maditerranean, staring out at the beauty of France’s Cote d’Azur, Mary Fisher felt only a blur of pain. “Will everything I do or say be tainted by the blush of dying instead of the blush and excitement of life and living?” she wrote in her journal.

She began talking to doctors and activists to figure out how she could best contribute. “I have to justify it and give this disease a kick,” she wrote. “I can’t go quietly.”

Her family wasn’t surprised. She had been a princess in a cloistered Republican world. She had not gone through a ’60s rebellion, protesting about civil rights or Vietnam. While other young people were hanging President Nixon in effigy, Mary simply thought of him as a beloved family friend.

But she had been a compassionate, compulsively organized youngster.

At suburban Detroit’s exclusive Cranbrook Schools, she was president of the class four years in a row. She was the first woman to do advance work in the White House under Gerald Ford. She initiated fundraising auctions at the fledgling public broadcasting station in Detroit.

“When she left after three years,” her mother bragged, “it took five people to replace her.”

When the automobile industry was in bad shape, Mary taught the wives of laid-off male workers to sew and bought them to material to make gingham placemats. Then she took the placemats to the stores and sold them.

When she moved to Florida with Brian, her second try after a brief first marriage, she had worked with women with drug and alcohol problems.

“In retrospect, it all seemed to be a precursor to some fort of humanitarian role,” says Philip Fisher. “But we’re not happy that this is the effort she has to undergo.”

She spent seven months agonizing about whether to go public, worrying about the effect on her family.

“Her sisters didn’t all quite agree with her decision to go public. They were worried about the effect on their children,” says the 86-year-old Max Fisher. “But they got over that. A lot of people could have hid in the bushes or got very cynical about this thing, but not Mary.”

AIDS advocates Mathilde Krim and Sally Fisher (no relation to Mary) told her that she could open up new doors of awareness to young people and upper-class women and mothers and Republicans.

Sally Fisher, the head of Taking Care (which offers workshops and retreats designed to support caregivers who are burnt-out), laid it on the line over lunch in Santa Fe, New Mexico one day soon

after Mary learned the news about her test. Mary observed that it was good to know that President Bush was doing all he could. Sally could not hold back.

“I literally spent the day explaining the realities of how AIDS had been almost dismissed by the Republican party, how we’d had two presidents who had almost never mentioned it and were basically doing nothing,” Sally said.

She told Mary bluntly: “I know you have this personal tragedy. But you are what we’ve been waiting for. You can reach the people who didn’t think they’re possibly at risk.”

At first Mary thought she could simply lobby President Bush behind the scenes. Her father’s role as honorary chairman of the Bush-Quayle ’92 National Finance Committee gave her plenty of access. “I thought if I could get to them, I could help them understand what was going on and they could change some things,” she recalls. “I thought maybe then I wouldn’t have to go public since nobody knew who I was anyway.”

But she soon realized that sympathetic fireside chats would not be enough. “I knew I couldn’t just sit with this information,” she says. “I needed to work.”

She also did not want to bring up her children in a shadowland. “I don’t like lying, it’s not in my nature,” she says. “I felt strongly that I wanted my children to live in an honest and open home. I did not want them to be stigmatized. I thought if I could lessen that stigma a bit, they wouldn’t have to fight so much on my account.”

By February, inspired and unnerved by the reception that Magic Johnson received when he revealed his news, she decided to go public. Betty Ford, a close friend (the Fords are the godparents to both her sons), told her to be sure that she knew what she was getting into by making personal health issues public. “She said, ’Once you say this, you can’t take it back.’ She should know. She did it,” says Fisher.

She told her story to the hometown newspaper, the Detroit Free Press. “Coming Out Against AIDS,” the headline said. “Wealth, Power and Love Didn’t Block the Virus.”

She worked from the inside, deciding with President Bush that she would be on the program at the Convention. But no one could have predicted the positive emotional punch of the speech at the same Convention that the President’s own deputy campaign manager, Mary Matalin, had fretted was homophobic.

Philip Fisher, who was backstage with Mary before the speech began, told his mother that he had never seen his sister so nervous.

“Then she came out and did such a fabulous job,” Mrs. Fisher recalled. “And I asked her, ’How did it happen that you were so nervous before and so calm during?’ And she said that she had prayed to God to help her not be nervous. And she suddenly was suffused with the feeling, ’What you have to say is more important than you.’”

Max Fisher was often traveling and working while Mary was growing up but he was there for her that night. On the wall near her, there is a picture of her father, crying and holding a handkerchief as he listens to her Convention speech.

“He is an incredible person,” Mary murmurs, looking back at the picture.

Her father returns the emotion, conceding he is “devastated” by the recent grim news out of Japan on AIDS.

“Sometimes I ask her if she’s overdoing it,” he says. “But that’s what she feels is her mission in life. Before the convention she was my daughter. Now I’m her father.”

Mary says that she has been surprised ever since Houston by the reaction she encounters.

“I didn’t realize, truly, that there is as much negativity and hatred out there as there is,” she says. “I didn’t grow up like that, so I was surprised. It seems to logical to me to want to protect your children, so I have a hard time understanding why people don’t want to talk about this disease.”

She says that she was recently in Moline, Illinois speaking at a high school.

“It was not an overly welcoming crowd. It was a crowd that, I could tell, didn’t really believe this was an issue for them. And it was a crowd that hadn’t had any previous education on AIDS.”

Afterwards a lovely, slightly built girl, thin with long blond wavy hair, approached her backstage. Fisher figured it was the usual -- “that she was really sexually active and that there was all this stuff going on for her and was she at risk?”

But the girl was not afraid for herself: she was afraid for Mary. “She pulled her Bible out, and she read me a passage from the Bible, and she said that she was very afraid that I was going to go to hell and that she wanted to save my soul. I have to tell you, I was taken aback. I got angry but also got scared. I got frustrated. I was sad about it. I mean, it’s 1994 and she’s young and this is what she was taught.”

She told the girl: “I have a very deep spiritual connection with God. I have a lot of faith that God has not forsaken me. And I don’t believe God judges me.”

She has had people cringe away from her, afraid to touch her.

“I usually am a little more forward, so I don’t actually give people an opportunity to do that,” she says. “I put my hand out and they will have to move back from it. I don’t wait for them to make the decision.”

When a young black man at a Florida high school asked her, “Can you get this disease from touching people?” she went down into the audience and explained: “I’m a mom and I would never want to do anything to endanger my children. And they eat off my plate and they drink out of my

glass and we hug and we love and we cuddle and we kiss. You can't get this disease by loving a friend."

Then she put her hands out toward him. "He hesitated," she said. "Then he gave me a huge hug and all his buddies applauded. It was very cool. So maybe the next time he hears some information about AIDS, he won't be quite so defensive and quite so afraid. My piece of it is to try to help people over that hurdle, that wall. It's very slow and it feels like it might be one person at a time. And that's OK. No, it's not OK. It's what it is."

She understands that the resistance to talking about AIDS is based in homophobia and thinks that it ridiculous.

"I mean, I'm a woman, I'm Jewish, I understand that people like to categorize people," she said. "But I get frustrated and angry when people use homophobia to not listen about AIDS because I think that is a cop-out."

She has been sounding a little angry, so now she puts her Reeboks up on the couch and calms down.

"I'm not a good angry person," she says, smiling ruefully. "Larry Kramer and I talk about that a lot. He'll say, 'Mary, you were on this show and you could have gotten a little bit angrier.' But I'll say, 'Larry, you were on this show and you could have been a little bit nicer.' But I adore Larry. He stands up for me to his ACT UP buddies. I feel strongly that I'm needed where I am and he's needed where he is."

She says that she has been looking for a way "to help people understand that it's using up a lot of energy to hate people. I think that if we did that -- all of us -- I just believe it is all about love when I see the amount of unconditional love that resounds in this community."

What about love in the romantic, rather than the humanitarian, sense?

"That's a piece of what I'm trying to figure out right now," she says, hesitantly. "Have I dated since HIV the same as I dated before? No. I have friends and I go out."

She gets asked by students about why she isn't angry at Brian. "I had a lot of anger in the beginning but I didn't really want to live like that and I didn't want the children's relationship with their dad to be an angry one," she said.

She occasionally gets asked about her social life but most people assume she is, shall we say, off the market.

"I think many people assume that if you have HIV, you stop having needs and wants, that you're not sexual anymore," she says, hugging one of her animal-print pillows like a little girl. "People have said to me, 'I thought you just stop doing that.'"

"And I must say, in the beginning because of everything attached to AIDS and HIV, you don't feel very sexual and sensuous. So there's a whole period of time that yiu're dealing with all the other issues of life and death. And then all of a sudden you realize you're living. I made a decision to live one day at a time, and live as a mom, and then I had to stop and think: Does this mean that this part of being a woman is no longer a part of life?

"I know that relationships are possible after HIV," she continues. "I have seen women in support groups who have married or formed relationships after finding out that one person's negative and the other's positive.

"However, the community I come from is not as welcoming for a woman with AIDS as the gay community is to itself. My world in dating and relationships is small to begin with; I'm divorced, widowed, whatever. A mom with two children, fairly independent. You know, you add HIV to it and the pool of potential men goes down to practically nothing.

"Also, I'm so public. Women who have relationships have told me that they meet someone and begin to have a connection before they make the decision to tell the person that they're positive. So there's already some feeling, some knowledge of the person. I don't have that because I'm a public person. Everybody knows about me before they meet me. And maybe that stops people. So it's a difficult thing."

And just at a time when her options would appear to be narrower, she feels more selective. "There's more involved now in what I would want in a relationship," she said. "It's not just about sex or sensuality, it's also about companionship, friendship, understanding and independence. I have two children, so I don't think a relationship would be casual."

She is not sure how much her two sons understand about her cataclysmic odyssey.

"I answer their questions but I don't dwell on it," she says. "We had to go through Brian's death. Max saw his dad sick and that was very frightening for him."

She says when she talks about AIDS, "I approach it as a disease like any other."

She said that her sons say things that lead her to believe somewhere they understand, such as "What happens if you get sick, Mom?" and "If you weren't here, where would we live?"

"I tell them, 'Mom isn't going anywhere,' and I don't get into the details of it. I don't think it's necessary for them to feel as if the other shoe's going to drop at any minute. I could be around a few more years. You may not be getting rid of me quite so soon."

Her brother Philip says that Mary's furious concentration on her life has refocused the entire family. "Mary has this power, she emanates this energy of making you question what priorities you have in life. Without even saying a word, she makes you feel you could do so much more good with your life."

She looks so glowing that it’s hard to believe that she must spend all her time wrestling with matters of mortality. I ask how her health is and she replies, “I’m good. I’m fine.”

She is not taking any medication. She takes vitamins, exercises and meditates.

“I’m doing the same thing that everyone else does,” she says. “The T-cells drop and you watch that happen and you try to take care of yourself. I get blood tests every three months. There will come a time soon when I will have to make some decisions and medically figure that out, even though there aren’t any medical answers. I’m approaching that point but my body isn’t there yet.”

I ask her what she things of President Clinton’s AIDS policies.

“What are they?” she asks slyly. “It’s fairly obvious that AIDS is not a priority for him. I’m sorry to say that’s true but it is.”

She seems a little relieved that the other party’s leaders—not her family friends, the people who are in framed pictures around her living room -- are the ones getting bashed for not paying enough attention.

“The AIDS office wasn’t given the mandate or money or access that it needed to really make a difference,” she says. "It was just put there. So I can’t say that it’s totally Kristine Gebbie’s fault or that it would be anybody’s fault. We haven’t seen leadership on the issue and there has to be leadership.

“At a minimum, I wish all our leaders, local and national, would admit this is an epidemic, explain what an epidemic is, and that it is avoidable and call for a cure. It isn’t like cancer or something you catch in the air. You can avoid this disease.”

Pointing out that the National AIDS Commission on which she served ended a year ago, she says, “I’m here to help no matter who’s there. So, if they need my help, I’m here. But I haven’t been called.”

Her angel-faced son Zack somes in.

“Hi, Mom,” he says.

“Hi, darling,” she says.

“We’re going to have a picnic in the tree house, you and I.”

She promises to be there in a little while, and he wanders into the kitchen, where the housekeeper is mushing tuna fish in a bowl.

Fisher finishes her point about leadership on AIDS, repeating the same refrain that consumes her days. “At some point, somebody’s got to take a risk and say, ’I care about the children, I care about the people infected with this disease.’ I see us in the middle of an epidemic that is growing

daily.”

But, somebody has taken that risk, of course. It is the woman I am saying good-bye to; the same woman who is now walking down the hill to have a tuna fish sandwich in a tree house with her son.
