Radiant Radical

Susan Sarandon on AIDS, ACT UP and the difference between boys and girls

March 1, 1997 By Robert Tracy

Just mentioning her name lights up the face of even the most sullen AIDS activist. Susan Sarandon is the real thing, a red-hot firebrand and true-blue troublemaker in the age of radical chic. All too often, celebrities use the occasional activist photo-op to advance a stalled career. For Sarandon, it's just the opposite. She has marched with us, yelled with us, cried with us. With grit and grace, she has risked her Q rating time after time to jump-start the nation's conscience. The movies Sarandon makes spark controversy and cult status. The statements she makes do the same.

A Sarandon specialty is scene-stealing for AIDS at the Academy Awards. In 1988 she pinned a SILENCE=DEATH button on her gown, garnering international attention for a fledgling ACT UP. Two years later Oscar operators demanded she remove her red ribbon before presenting an award. Sarandon refused. In 1993, Sarandon and her partner, actor-director Tim Robbins, used their airtime to publicize a distinctly unglamorous cause: The imprisonment of HIV positive Haitians at Guantánamo Bay. Sarandon and Robbins were bad-mouthed around town and banned from the Oscars, but the Haitians got their freedom. Last year, when Sarandon won Best Actress for her luminous performance in *Dead Man Walking*, it was sweet revenge indeed.

Sarandon just turned 50 and shows no signs of slowing down. Between filming *Magic Hour* with Paul Newman and Gene Hackman, and cochairing the HIV/AIDS Human Rights Project, she spoke with *POZ* about her ACT UP days, AmFAR glam gal Sharon Stone, Hollywood homophobia, being a mom and 30 years of raising consciousness by raising hell.

-- Walter Armstrong

When did you first realize you could use your celebrity for gay rights or women's issues or the fight against AIDS?

Susan Sarandon: I think I was always an activist. The fact that I became a celebrity -- that happened on a separate course. But they did affect each other. There's one incident when I remember consciously making the connection. But I think I did just what I felt I had to do. I didn't have kids then, so I was freer than I am now. Everything I've done, I've done as a person -- an interested, affected human being who wants some answers.

I remember very clearly being on the steps of the 42nd Street Library for a big demonstration in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. At that point I was an actor, but I was still a kid. Bella

Abzug spoke, Marlo Thomas spoke, all these people were getting up and speaking. Then suddenly they thrust me in front of about 30 microphones, and I said, “I really can’t. I don’t know what to say. I don’t have the faintest idea.” Marlo Thomas looked at me and said, “It doesn’t matter what you say. The point is, you’re a celebrity, and we have to get on the evening news.” So I did it. I spoke very quietly and from the heart. I remember exactly what I said because I was so traumatized.

What did you say?

I said, “I made a huge mistake. I assumed because the ERA is right that it will pass. And that’s not true. That’s not going to happen unless we do something. I’m here to lend my voice to these other people because the ERA is right -- it should happen.”

From that point on I understood that the media wasn’t covering issues -- they were covering celebrities. So whether it’s because I have the right, or whether it’s to say, “Thank you for a blessed life,” or whether it’s for my own survival and for my family’s future, I feel it’s my responsibility to at least shine some light on information people aren’t getting. Because usually these are voices that are not empowered, or there wouldn’t be a problem. I mean, the issues I take on aren’t the ones affecting white heterosexual men. They’re almost always issues affecting women, people of color, gays, homeless, poor, immigrants -- people without a voice. So I’m just like a flashlight. I try to shine a little light. That’s all.

But you’ve been personally touched by your activism, whether it’s AIDS, the homeless, the quarantine of HIV positive Haitians...

Well, there’s no other reason to do it. It so infuriates me when people talk about activism like it’s a hobby. You know, “Are you into saving the whales now?” “You’re into AIDS activism, right?” As if you’re taking a language class.

All of these things completely impact my life. It’s not because I’m a saint or some altruistic person looking to fill up her day with a hobby. This is critical stuff that affects me, those I love, the future of my world, the future for my kids, for my own sense of what’s right and what’s wrong.

It’s important to understand that when you see something wrong, some injustice, and you do nothing to fix it, then you’re just as culpable as the people who are doing it. Unless you say no, you are in collusion with the people who set it up.

It’s difficult. It starts when you’re little, picking on a kid in school and being really scared not to do it because all the powerful kids are doing it. To try to stand up to those in power is very hard. But you just get to the point where you can’t live with yourself unless you do whatever you can. It’s frustrating for me, because my family comes first, and I really don’t have the hours in the day to do what I would like. I do nothing compared to the people who are immersed in this as their life’s work.

Do you think for Sharon Stone, her AIDS activism on behalf of AmFAR is a kind of hobby?

I don’t know. If she helps AmFAR, I don’t want to knock her. I don’t know what she’s going to do for AIDS; I don’t know what AmFAR’s going to do for AIDS, either. People are very tired of getting mail about donations and benefits. You could spend your entire life on the benefits circuit. But there’s all different ways to try to get some of these unpopular issues on the evening news.

And I think the Sharon Stones of the world -- she’s very glamorous and everyone knows who she is -- if she brings in mainstream people who aren’t active and who feel safe with Sharon Stone, then good for her. Let her do it. Being involved is being involved. There are easier ways to get publicity than to head AmFAR. I don’t believe she’s -- well, I *hope* she’s not doing it just as a hobby or as a social experience.

I wish them well. AmFAR doesn’t need me. Oh, I shouldn’t say that!

Which organizations do need you?

I tend to go toward the grass-roots groups, the ones that are more radical. I remember the early days, the very first AIDS protest march I was part of. At that point, I don’t even think it was being called AIDS -- it was still being called “gay cancer.” It seemed like I was the only woman there, going from Sheridan Square down to City Hall. And I was asked to speak. The demonstration never made it into the papers, which was really shocking to me.

This was in 1982, right when my friend Bobby Christian [an African American actor to whom Robert Mapplethorpe dedicated his *Black Book*] died. It was such a burden keeping his illness a secret and dealing with the terror and loneliness and misery of this disease. In a way it was a blessing nobody knew what was happening.

You were one of the first celebrities to support ACT UP. What attracted you to the group?

In the beginning -- before ACT UP fragmented -- it represented anarchy with structure and the use of civil disobedience in a positive way. The group was angry and their actions were disruptive, but they got so much done. The men and women had such style and humor.

Whenever I had to do a press junket, I would call people in ACT UP and ask which sound bites I should get out there. Way back then, the Number 1 thing they said was that living with HIV wasn’t a death sentence. They wanted to change the phrase *AIDS victims* to *people with AIDS*. They wanted to re-educate people about all the misconceptions so there would be a change in the public’s consciousness. The slogan SILENCE=DEATH was one of the most powerful things to come out of the group. It’s as poignant as ever today.

Weren’t you even arrested with ACT UP?

Sure. I supported ACT UP whenever I could. I wore ACT UP buttons when I did *David Letterman*, *Johnny Carson* and *Good Morning America*. I was wearing the red ribbon four years before they were giving them out as fashion statements at the Academy Awards. It was back when they asked us to remove the red ribbons before we went on TV. At the 1994 Oscars, there was a long line of

limousines in a traffic jam, and I jumped out and went over to talk to people from ACT UP/Chicago. It was a way of bringing attention to their protest.

ACT UP was also part of the civil disobedience we did in 1993 to shine light on the HIV positive Haitians locked up at Guantánamo Bay, which we knew we would be arrested for. I went on *Donahue* with Jesse Jackson to talk about the issue. I read letters at the rally before we got arrested. After I got arrested, I couldn't let go of the issue. I knew we had to do more. That's when Tim and I decided to make a statement at the Oscars.

We didn't tell anyone what we were going to do. We were really nervous and tense as we waited to go onstage. I could barely speak. Afterward no one we knew would look at us. Gil Cates, the director of the Academy Awards, ran after us screaming. We were attacked and banned from the Oscars for two years. And I got all this hate mail saying, "Take your queer, fag, nigger HIV positive friends into your house."

Do you see a lot of homophobia in Hollywood?

Of course. There are a lot of gay people in the power structure of Hollywood who have not come out. I'm talking about producers, studio executives, agents. They're not out, and they have the power to green-light film projects. There aren't enough women directing, and there aren't enough people of color writing and directing. Hollywood has never been a leader. The movie industry is just like politics. They make their decisions by polls. I don't know why people are shocked by this.

Between acting and activism, what's it like to raise three children?

With my daughter, I always thought, "I'm going to make sure she embraces who she is, has every opportunity and knows how to keep her opinions past age 11." But I so underestimated the madness inflicted upon male children. It's clear what the problems raising a female are, but it's like a minefield with boys. It's almost as if girls are taught to deny their truth and boys are forced to live a lie, which is much worse. And now I feel I have to advocate much more for protecting boys because I can't even imagine how my boys get from who they are now to being like most men in the world.

Which AIDS organizations are you supporting now?

The People With AIDS Coalition (PWAC) is a group I adore. I fundraise and do interviews for them, I visit the offices, I respond to people who write letters to me. What I love and respect about PWAC is the fact that 99 percent of the people working and putting out their publication and staffing the hotlines are people living with HIV and AIDS. So they can speak with authority and empowerment about it. I mean, they know. They can speak in the first person to people who are terrified and to people who are despondent and to people who are joyous from a perspective that the rest of us can't.

But I've become aware of this huge gap in a lot of organizations between who they serve and who they should be serving. Because a lot of these groups are basically white and male-dominated -- even in the gay community -- women are being ignored. People of color are being ignored. Drug

users are being ignored.

I've been trying to do a little cross-pollination. There are groups that are made up of, say, all mothers -- but all upper-class or middle-class mothers in one organization, and all lower-class mothers and mothers of color in another. But they aren't dealing with each other. Or combining their resources or connections. And that's what has to happen. Everybody in the fight against AIDS wants the same thing, but our own prejudices have made it very difficult to get things done.

Lorenzo's Oil addresses prejudices in the medical establishment. Is that why you did the film?

Absolutely. *Lorenzo's Oil* was a movie about AIDS. The disease was different, but the struggle to survive was the same. I wanted to do a film about AIDS because of my gay friends, but there's so much homophobia and defensiveness in Hollywood that it was impossible to make a movie about gay men. Showing how indifferent the medical establishment can be to a kid was another way to open up the discussion. We managed to talk about the medical establishment when no one else would. And again, in the publicity I did for the film, I got information from activists about what needed to be said.

Some of your remarks were very much against the American Medical Association. What was its response?

The AMA sent me a lot of nasty letters. They told me to shut my mouth! They said, "You don't know what you're talking about." But you know, the drug that we were fighting to be made available in *Lorenzo's Oil* is now available. There was a scene where the parents of the kids with the disease mention AIDS activists as a model.

While we're talking about the medical establishment, I'd like you to comment on AZT and other new drugs.

I don't know how people survive on AZT and all those combinations of poisonous drugs. It's very important for people with life-threatening diseases to have alternative treatments. But that's not what's getting most of the press, because they're not profit-making for the large corporations -- which are at the root of all evil.

It's interesting -- people in a life-and-death struggle don't stray very far from who they were when they were well. They aren't going to start experimenting when they get sick. A person who's frightened and just wants an authority figure to give the standard line very rarely becomes a different person when their life is threatened.

There's been a lot of hype recently about the epidemic being over...

For who? Gay white men? The epidemic is definitely not over. Especially not for people of color. When I was over at PWAC, I was told the demographics show that AIDS is rising mainly among women of color and their kids, and IV drug users. They say it is finally contained in the gay community. But I'm still losing friends. And it doesn't seem as if the epidemic's ending when someone you love dies.

After 15 years of AIDS -- the deaths of close friends, all the battles that still need to be fought -- are you tired of activism?

We're *all* exhausted. When I was at the PWAC office, we talked about how to keep going, keep fighting. They told me it really helped just to have someone there from the outside -- new people who bring in new energy. These are people who are taking on this enormous task for themselves and for other people, with few funds and very little encouragement. It's hard to keep at that every single day. Then there are the people who are tired of being besieged by information in the mail. They just don't want to know any more because they don't think it really affects them. They don't understand that the whole world is getting grayer as we lose more and more people -- and it's their world. But it's hard to keep at it. It's hard to keep at it.

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