The River’s Edge

An interview with comedian Joan Rivers

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I’ll never forget the first time I went to interview Joan Rivers. She was just beginning her talk show on FOX and though I had always loved her, I was a little bit afraid. Her humor was always so sharp. I found myself fretting, "What if I’m the target?"

As I entered the room for the interview, we took one look at each other and burst out laughing. By some odd coincidence we had worn the exact same outfit -- black dress, black hose, the same heels. We were mirror images of each other, identical twins in black.

True to character, although I was there to do the interview with her, she asked the first two questions: “Are you married?” and “Who’s your surgeon?” Imagine her delight when I told her I was dating a plastic surgeon in Brentwood. She kvelled!

It was a great beginning to a friendship that has lasted for a long time. In the early ’80s, Joan risked her very high-profile public status to speak out about a mysterious malady that was invading the gay community and striking many of Joan’s friends. Perhaps it is Joan’s indefatigable ambition, her sense of fairness or just inherent pluck, but Joan offered to appear at one of the very first fund-raisers for an illness that, at the time, wasn’t even named.

A few months ago, too many years after she first spoke to rally the community together, Joan addressed the many thousands of participants in this year’s New York City AIDS Walk in Central Park and told them all, her voice cracking, that she wanted to come and be funny, to cheer them on. But she couldn’t. She was struck with such deep sadness because too many friends have died, and we still have to gather like this, in mourning and angry at the continuing loss.

I spoke to Joan soon after her appearance in Central Park.

POZ: Can I tell you how extraordinary your performance and your daughter’s performance was in [the recent NBC made-for-TV movie] Tears of Laughter: the Joan and Melissa Rivers Story?

JR: Thank you. We took the time slot and we were very happy. But every critic disliked it, and Melissa called very upset, and I said to her that for once they are wrong.

POZ: Why didn't they like it? I know you were widely criticized not so much for your performances but for doing it.

JR: Well, I've never been liked by the critics. But what can you do about it? What can you do?

POZ: Well sometimes people stay hurt for years and years, and other people come to terms with it and say "fine."

JR: "Fine?!" You say fuck 'em. I'm sorry to say that, but I know it was a good movie. I knew that nobody had ever shown the mother/daughter relationship the way we did. Nobody had ever shown mourning the way we did. Nobody had ever talked about suicide the way we did.

POZ: You have been there time and time again for people in the AIDS community. Do you feel that they were there for you when you lost Edgar [Rosenberg, her late husband]?

JR: Oh, what a good question. I don't know. No. The mail to FOX was not overwhelming. But you can't go back. Do you know what I mean? It's a stroke of fate that I am in the AIDS community. You can't spend time doing tit for tat. We are all in the AIDS community.

POZ: You know you've spoken of the hopelessness you felt at trying to help Edgar -- trying to change things and even make Edgar come back. Is it a different type of hopelessness or is it similar. You look at how many of us have died and yet there seems to be no relief in sight.

JR: I think it [AIDS] is sadder, because Edgar was 62. Do you know what I'm saying? He had a very good run for his money. When I see a boy of 23 or a young girl of 19, that gets to me. It makes no sense at all. I keep saying we've gotten to the moon, god damn it! Why can't we find a cure?

POZ: Tell me about the many friends -- I know you and I have touched on this before -- but tell me about your closest friend that died of AIDS and how it affected you.

JR: I guess that would be Jason who was my hairdresser. He was with me 14 years, and he just went very fast -- in a year and a half. I went through everything with him, every phase with him. He was doing my hair for Hollywood Squares. We took a private dressing room so nobody could see that he was ill. We did everything to keep that very quiet and very silent. I went with him through the whole thing. The effect is still devastating and it's been eight years. In a sense, I've taken over his parents. I send the Mother's Day card Jason would have sent, the Father's Day and anniversary cards. I'm the one who calls on Christmas. You feel we were all given such a sad legacy, but that, in a way, is what friendship is about. And you do it. How do you thank a friend for being a friend? You can still do the things that they would do if they were alive. I was just going through the gaps in my life that shouldn't be there. I was going to grow old with, laugh with, my inner circle and they're not here. It devastates me. It devastates me at Thanksgiving. It devastates me at Christmas. It devastates me when something funny happens. It is a major, major loss.

POZ: Speak to me about role models such as Mary Fisher, who says "Yes, I have HIV and I'm

fighting.” Speak to me about that.

JR: Mary Fisher is saying, “It happens to women; it happens to society women; it happens to wealthy women.” I think what she did was so wonderful and very courageous. She is the kind of person that could have kept it totally under wraps, totally silent. We would have heard that she died of who knows what. I think that’s terrific what she did.

POZ: What are your thoughts on people who are HIV positive and hide it? I mean would you encourage them?

JR: I think it’s tragic. I’ll tell you right now, that’s the thing that gets me the angriest. Everyone thinks it has nothing to do with them. HIV is a flag that goes up. People are still terrified of it. I understand the people who won’t come out and say it. I totally understand and sympathize 100 percent with them. I think if I had it, with my mouth, I would come out and tell. But I’m a public figure and it’s a whole different thing. I wouldn’t need to worry that I was going to lose my job. I’ll tell you something, though, if I was working in a restaurant I would think seven times before I said it. Absolutely! I can’t lie to you.

POZ: You really think you would?

JR: Oh, if I had that kind of job, not me. But I understand people that do. Totally understand and sympathize. There is a lot of education to be done still.

POZ: Tell me your feelings on how important it is to have sex education in schools.

JR: I think there should be sex education in the home. There should be sex education in the schools. People who are on drugs should be educated. I think everyone should be so aware of what and how you get this. Start at a very young age. What scares me about the young generation is that people tell me they are very lax all over again. I don’t understand it.

POZ: Now here is a frightening thought and a frightening question. It’s happening all over the world since one of the groups that is increasingly diagnosed with HIV is young, heterosexual women. What would you do if Melissa came to you and said, “Mom, I’m HIV positive”?

JR: Well, ideally you would handle it. Say “OK we’re going to fight this son of a bitch. You are going to be around for the cure.” I have a friend that has been fighting this for 14 years. I think you have to have a lot of determination. I think that helps tremendously. I’ll tell you one thing. I would try every goddamn cure there was in the world. I’m not interested in what the federal government has to say!

POZ: Give me an example of a talk you would have with your own daughter about practicing safer sex.

JR: We have had talks and did when she was younger. I just told her that this is not a question

where you look at someone and say, “Do I love this person enough to die for them?” Be truly sur of what you’re doing. It’s Russian roulette. It has nothing to do with the person that you are with. It’s somebody that they knew that knew somebody that knew somebody. I continue to drum that into her head. Both times she had a major affair she was tested.

POZ: You encourage her?

JR: Absolutely. I paid for it.

POZ: Do you get tested?

JR: Oh yes, I do something that people tell me is very stupid. Every time I go for a blood test for anything -- you know you always get the opportunity in our business, every time you do television or a movie they have to insure you -- I automatically say run it through for AIDS too. Oh, absolutely!

POZ: I don’t think that’s stupid. I think it’s smart.

JR: Insurance companies pick it up and say, “Why is she doing this? Does she know something we don’t know?” But you can get tested anonymously.

POZ: You were one of the first people on the battle lines in the war against AIDS. I want to know what you have noticed over the last decade in terms of people joining this battle, particularly your peers.

JR: Oh well, it changed around totally with Rock Hudson. You know that. He was the watershed. Up until then, everyone was very scared. The fact that he was gay was never mentioned in Hollywood. They have all these closets, and they still have, I think, moral closets. They were very, very under the bed, and with Rock Hudson it changed. Now everyone has come outdoors. Thank God!

POZ: Do you think one of the things that still hasn’t changed is that we have a certain homophobia in Hollywood?

JR: I don’t know. I think so many have come out of the closet, but, you know, people get so confused when it’s a romantic situation. If a man is going to be a romantic leading man they want to think he likes women. You understand? It’s like you can’t be both. You can’t come out and say, “Here I am in this movie, and I am mad about you, my darling woman,” and in real life be homosexual. It all comes down to dollars and cents. But an actor should be able to act anything, and so we shouldn’t accept that.

POZ: I want to congratulate you on your Tony nomination [for Sally Marr… and her escorts].

JR: Isn’t that great? It’s spectacular!

POZ: You know, it’s interesting to hear you talk about living your life to the fullest. There has been so much loss and death around you, with the loss of Edgar and others you love. But in the last couple of years I’ve never seen anyone live life to the degree that you are living yours.

JR: I do everything. Want to go to Europe? I’m there. Want to go ballooning? You got it! Want to try a new Broadway show? Want to do a movie in Vancouver? I’m there. I do everything because if you don’t, you’re a fool, because you turn around and say, “I never did it. I wanted to do it, and I never did it.”

POZ: Are you afraid to do anything?

JR: Bungee jump.

POZ: Did you get a new dog?

JR: Yes, I got a new dog for Hanukkah and ruined Spike’s [the original dog] life forever.

POZ: Will Spike even speak to you?

JR: It took him about seven months to finally figure out, “OK, she still loves me best.” They are both a lot of fun. My new baby’s name is Veronica. We take a lot of private walks, just the two of us. She’s cute -- she looks just like Barbra Streisand. I’m waiting for her to bark, “People, people who need people....”

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