All About Colleen

The theater legend was one of the first AIDS fighters

January 1, 1998 By Tom Viola

Colleen Dewhurst's life was one of passion, insight and hilarity, and her autobiography sketches the complete woman: Daughter, wife (twice) of George C. Scott and mother (of Alex, Campbell and Murphy Brown); student of Harold Clurman and Joseph Papp, actress in definitive renditions of the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Edward Albee, winner of prizes and awards, a star; president of Actors' Equity Association and trustee of the Actors' Fund of America.

And activist. In the mid-'80s, when few would even publicly whisper the word AIDS for fear of losing friends, family and profession, Dewhurst spoke out for those who faced the disease's darkest challenges. Her heartfelt, impulsive courage eventually led the theater community to extend itself to those in great need and to marshal its formidable fundraising forces.

Much has changed since then. But it's important especially just now, at a time of "Compassion Burnout" complaints and "When Epidemics End" headlines, that we recall Dewhurst's quick compassion and genuine concern. As Rodger McFarlane said, upon hearing of her death at 65 in August 1991, "Colleen Dewhurst was the best friend a person with AIDS ever had." Many have followed her example. But all of us living with AIDS could still use a friend like her today.

[EXCERPT]

In November of 1985, a determined group from Actors' Equity joined forces with a number of other organizations and individuals willing to fight this same battle. They produced "The Best of the Best," the first mainstream, gala AIDS benefit that raised over one million dollars for three then-fledgling AIDS research and service organizations, Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the AIDS Resource Center, and the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFAR). I have always felt that the event punched a hole in an invisible wall of silence, a wall that is still not completely torn down today. A phenomenal list of entertainers – Bette Midler, Christopher Reeve, Lily Tomlin, Victor Borge, Carol Burnett, Jerry Herman with the cast of *La Cage aux Folles* - came together on stage at the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. At the same time, I began to hear incredible public suggestions of quarantine and stories of people being removed from their apartments or fired from their jobs if it was even suspected that they might have "it." It was inconceivable to me that this was the response to the loss of so many lives and, for us in the theatre, the loss of people with great gifts. People who were geniuses in what they could create. The very people we needed to help us see our way through what was clearly becoming an epidemic. It was obscene to watch

the government and much of the media still pay little or no attention to AIDS because it was only about “them,” the undesirables – gay men, people of color, drug addicts and the poor. It was time to do something. AIDS was not “them”; AIDS is “us>” For many onstage and behind the scenes, the evening was less an entertainment and more a call to arms. For by the end of the gala event, a statement was made loudly and clearly that we would not sit by and do nothing.

As I came to the stage door that evening, I was astonished to see cameras from the networks and reporters eager to talk to people who supposedly were untouchable because of this particular disease. And the statement of the evening was that we were a;; threatened and would all suffer the loss of people we loved, unless the county moved forward in terms of responsible education, and money was immediately brought forward for research and services. I will always believe that that night was the beginning. Yes, the entertainment industry has been horribly hard hit by AIDS, but AIDS is taking its toll on every industry and moving through every community. We in the “business” are simply more visible. But since we are, it is our responsibility to call attention to the unacknowledged, speak of the unspeakable and, if we can, use whatever this celebrity is that people are attracted to, to raise money and move people to do the right thing.

And then there are the days when I long just to be able to have Japanese food with Orrin and Jimmy again and laugh about wondrous and silly things.

From Colleen Dewhurst, Her Autobiography, *written with and completed by Tom Viola. Published by Scribner. Reprinted with permission.*

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/colleen-dewhurst-12571-8940