# Elizabeth Taylor Tells the Truth

Why she'll never marry again...how Donna Shalala is almost a murderer...where you can go if you dis Michael Jackson. The patron saint of AIDS puts her mouth where her money is

November 1, 1997 By Kevin Sessums

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Elizabeth Taylor is still the world's most magnificent movie star, even though she hasn't starred in a film in 18 years. Just listen to the expert, columnist Liz Smith, regarding the scourge of paparazzi—that frightening barometer of fame for the fin de siecle. "Can you guess which female celebrity, caught topless would ensure a million-dollar fee? It's 65-year-old Elizabeth Taylor!" Taylor, who's been famous now—at times notorious—for more than half a century, must have gotten a kick out of reading that item. Yet what this remarkable woman has done for more than a decade has nothing to do with press clippings or prying lensmen. She has chosen instead to dedicate herself to educating the world about AIDS, and her voice has been a clarion call to redouble our efforts. The founding chairman of the American Foundation for AIDS research (AmFAR), which provides much-needed funds to community-based science, she later formed the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation to support direct care for people with HIV.

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Those who cynically waited for her to tire of the cause once grief for her friend Rock Hudson subsided have been thankfully disappointed. And she has utilized that valued celebrity of hers to raise a fortune for research and patient care.

Taylor agreed to meet me recently at her home in Bel Air. The house, next door to the Reagans', once belonged to Nancy Sinatra, Sr. Taylor bought it in 1982 for a couple of million dollars after she divorced her sixth husband, Sen. John Warner of Virginia. She kept a lot of the house and its furnishing the way the first Mrs. Sinatra left them—except for the mezuzah that Taylor, a convert to Judaism, has attached to the front door's frame.

It is a surprisingly small home, done mostly in white. The carpet is modified white shag. White chaise lounges lunge toward the living room from either side of a large fireplace. On each chaise is an ornate pillow designed by her late friend, Gianni Versace, one imprinted with the face of his trademark Medusa head, eerily saddened by his murder only two days before. A huge aquarium filled with exotic lavender fish takes up one whole wall. Jagged geological stones, echoing the colors of the fish, are precisely placed about the gigantic white lacquered coffee table. A collection of paintings by Degas, Van Gogh, Monet, Modigliani and Renoir hang above the white sofa. On it is a needlepoint cushion embroidered with the adage IT'S NOT THE HAVING, IT'S THE GETTING.

On the bookshelves in the game room are three Oscars. Two are Best Actress statues, received for *Butterfield 8* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The other is the Jean Herolt Humanitarian Award, bestowed in 1992. Also on the shelves are cherished photographs with the Reagans and the Fords. There is a jaunty shot from Ascot; laughing, she is escorted by Noel Coward and Richard Burton. Two pictures catch her candidly keeping company with that other famous Elizabeth from London. A beautiful portrait of Natalie Wood, a present from friend Robert Wagner, has been given prominence.

I walk back into the living room. Leaning toward the aquarium, I inspect the piscine shades of lavender floating before my face.

"Hello, I'm Elizabeth," I hear.

A dog yelps.

I turn to see Elizabeth Taylor. My recent computer search of bold-faced info magnifies the vision of a rather fragile woman before me, her face still boldly beautiful. Take, like me, a deep, appreciative breath: *National Velvet, Lassie Come Home, Little Women, Father of the Bride*, Nicky Hilton, *A Place in the Sun*, Michael Wilding, *Giant, Raintree County*, Maggie the Cat, Mike Todd, *Suddenly Last Summer*, Eddie Fisher, *Cleopatra*, double-barreled Burton, *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Krupp diamond, 73 hospital stays, weight fluctuations, Studio 54, the Betty Ford Clinic, mother of four, grandmother of nine, Malcolm Forbes, The French Legion of Honor, Broadway revivals of *The Little Foxes* and *Private Lives*, UNICEF, those three Oscars, perfume mogul, Michael Jackson, the Ryan White CARE Bill, Larry Fortensky, hip replacements, Chechnian war orphans, and now, the recent recuperation from the removal of a tumor attached to her brain.

Taylor is wearing a white caftan-like gown. Her feet are shod in see-through plastic sandals, her toenails panted a frosty white. She wears very little makeup. Her hair, a shock of frostier white, is propped into a spiky flat-top. Sugar, her beloved 5-year-old Maltese, has entered with her. The tiny bundle of barking beribboned white hair seems to have molted from atop Taylor's head.

I take my place on the sofa. Taylor precisely places herself in a chair by my side. Surprisingly, her most noticeable bit of jewelry is the red piece of string tied about her left wrist as if it were a bracelet.

"Are you into Kabbalah?" I ask, knowing that a red wrist string is worn when one has begun to study this ancient Jewish form of mysticism, which has taken the place of Marianne Williamson's spiritual shtick among the cognoscenti of Culver City and its environs. Madonna and Sandra Bernhard and Roseanna are adherents.

"Yes. I started about two months ago," says Taylor, positioning Sugar in her lap. "I am deeply, privately spiritual. I've always been interested in spiritual things. Kabbalah is not conformist. You don't have to be Jewish to believe in it. It's not a religion. It coincides with many of my beliefs."

“Which are?” I ask.

Taylor burst into the heightened giggles that gurgle up from her inner child-star. It is as if Lassie had just done something vulgar in from of adult company. “I don’t want to talk about it” she insists, calming herself by calming Sugar.

She does want to talk about a lot of other subjects. And our conversation is laced throughout with the sound of her distinct laughter, her most clarion of calls—not that girlish giggle, but a grown-up woman’s wanton, gritty cackle.

**KEVIN SESSUMS: You have an English passport, Elizabeth, but you haven’t lived there since you were a small child. I was wondering if there are bits of yourself that you still consider British.**

ELIZABETH TAYLOR: I guess I feel that London is my hometown and my roots are English—especially the countryside. The most vivid memories of my youth—when I was allowed to be young before I was in films—are of riding my horse in the country. There is nothing as beautiful as the English countryside.

**When was the last time you went there?**

I haven’t been back for five years because of the quarantine law with Sugar. They don’t allow dogs in. It is so ridiculous, because of that tunnel they’ve built. Rats can now hail a taxi and go back and forth to the Continent.

**One of the most serious AIDS policy differences between the States and England is the position each country has taken regarding the needle exchange issue.**

In Washington, DC, I’ve quietly opened a needle exchange with only $72,000. I started a center. From the outside you can’t tell what it is. I say only $72,000 because it has changed so many lives. It’s a center for needle exchange and condom distribution.

**Listen to these statistics. In 1988 in England and in Wales and Northern Ireland, a needle-exchange system reduced the seroconversion rate from 12 percent to five percent. In 1985 they started it in Scotland and the results were even more astounding. The seroconversion rate dropped from 77 percent to 18 percent. Why, considering numbers like that, do you think it’s been so difficult to get the Clinton administration behind the needle-exchange program?**

I don’t know. I don’t understand it. I could take some of these needle exchange people to testify if it would do any good. Sixty-three percent of AIDS cases among women are related to sharing needles. One-third of all AIDS cases are due to sharing needles. All! People stupidly think that if you have a needle then you’re going to go out and try some heroin today. It’s so naïve. This little center I’ve opened is a placed where you can get food once a day. They even have a makeover

once a month—hair and nails and things like that. It's extraordinarily effective. It can be done!

**Donna Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services, is really standing in the way of the Clinton administration getting behind a needle exchange program. Some say she's just running interference for President Clinton, who doesn't want to be accused of being soft on drugs in any way. But there are still others who insist that she is protecting her own political hide because she wants to run for governor of Wisconsin and can't appear too liberal back home.**

I think she is causing so many problems and being so irresponsible. But has anybody told this woman that she could be responsible for a lot of deaths? I'm not accusing her of that, because it's a pretty harsh accusation, but by not allowing it she's putting up a barrier. How are we going to break through that? One woman!

**Well, she's serving at the behest of one man. What is your attitude about Clinton?**

He's disappointed me. He's had the opportunity to turn around the government and come forward and help, like he said he would at the beginning. He hasn't. He's waffled. And by putting this woman Shalala in charge, he's done something very damaging. That appointment was worse than just waffling on the issue. I mean, the CDC and AmFAR can prove without a reasonable doubt that needle exchange can work.  There is no question. This Donna Shalala should go to some of the needle exchange places and look at the records. Instead she's just shooting her mouth off. She could do something so dramatic and lasting as far as people's lives are concerned. The fact that she's not doing it in order to get to a higher political seat in her life makes me want to do something to her other seat.

**What? Kick her in the ass?**

Yes!

**You lived in Washington as a senator's wife for several years. Do you miss it?**

*Noooooooo!!!!* Washington is the hardest town for a woman in the world—especially if you're married to a politician. If the woman is the politician, then it might be quite different. But if you're wedded to the politician, it's like your lips are sealed. You are a robot. They even tell you what you can wear. You can imagine how that sat with me! I was told that I—me!—was not allowed to wear purple because it smacked of royalty.

For the two months of campaigning, I obeyed them. But then, after the election, the Republican women gave a luncheon in my honor for all that I had done for the campaign, and I put on my purplest Halston pantsuit. I told them the story that the women who ran John Warner's campaign had forbid me to wear purple. I got up and pointed out one specific woman. I said, "That one! Right there!"

**AIDS itself has always been awash with Washingtonian concerns that are almost as silly as that. Political expediency. Moral judgments. Turf wars. Bitterly fought social policies.**

Unfortunately, Kevin, people lose their sense of compassion.

**With protease inhibitors, the medical news has become more hopeful for people living with AIDS. Ironically, the politicians now feel that maybe they can put this controversial issue on the back burner, where they've always wanted it to be.**

And there is hope. But the percentages of infection are higher for men and women between their teen years and 25 because they have stopped being cautious. People are becoming careless again—like in the '80s. And the thing about protease inhibitors is that not everybody can afford them.

**I know that you have been frustrated in your own attempts to make inroads here in Los Angeles into the inner-city communities that are being devastated by AIDS. How have you been received by the African-American power structure?**

The black people do not want me.

**Why is that?**

Because I'm white. They don't want a Big White Mama coming down there. They think it's condescending. Why would they mind? Before Doris Duke died, I thought that I had put together $3 million targeted for South Central. That news was not received with joy. I don't know why. I wanted to work with the black people, though it is their responsibility to decide what to do with the money. But if I can raise it, it is then up to the community to be responsible for it. I'm not trying to take that away from them. That's something they should do with pride. But then Doris died—and all that scandal happened—so I didn't get the money. I haven't given up trying to be of some help in the inner cities. But I have to have the money to do it. I just can't go waltzing down there and say that I have a great idea. I've got to have the money. And it's not just the black people down there—it's Latin and Asian, too. It's people of color. It's not just a black issue.

**One of your big disagreements with AmFAR was on this issue of branching out with their work, or taking AmFAR to the international stage.**

We finally did go international. But I did have a big fight. I mean, the United States is not the only nation that is suffering with AIDS. But Americans are very chauvinistic. I was brought up internationally. I've traveled worldwide. I helped people in Africa years ago. I've always thought more globally. I did spend those first seven years of my life in England.

**Where does this impulse to help spring from? You could sit on your ass and reign as "Elizabeth Taylor," but you don't.**

I find being “Elizabeth Taylor” really boring. I think if you were born with privileges—or given privileges—then you should share them. Like money—it’s to share. I’ve known too many people who just sat and hoarded and were miserable. Just miserable SOBs. I have always believed that giving is one of the reasons that we were put on this earth. I’ve acted on that belief since I was old enough to leave my nest…

**Yet you grew up right here in a town known for its narcissism.**

But I saw that. My parents were very smart. They made sure that my playmates were not in the industry. My father was an art dealer, and he and my mother made sure I learned and thought about other things.

**You’ve talked before about the first time you nearly died—back in 1961—from viral pneumonia and the out-of-body experience you had. When you awoke in your hospital room, you said, “I wanted a paintbrush…I wanted to paint with the sense of color I saw.” I was struck by that, not because of the experience you had, but how at that moment you became your father’s child. You became at your death his little girl. You’ve never really talked about your father, Elizabeth. What was your relationship with him like?**

Mmmmmmm…yes. Aaahhh…I…aahhh…didn’t really know my father well until I was about 21. We had missed each other in a way. I didn’t really have much of a youth, you know, except for those first seven years riding my horse back in Kent. Those are the happiest memories of my life—riding bareback on those 3,000 acres and being able to jump over streams and go through the forests.

It was a magical experience. I could let my imagination fly, my sense of poetry fly. It was like a make-believe world, but it was a real world. Then I had to go to school, and it was drudgery. I did enjoy ballet class because it was a form of self-expression. I think that is why I became a child actress. The choice was given to me. I could make-believe. I could express myself outside what was going on in the world.

And what was going on in the world was dreadful. It was World War II. I was here by then and my England was being destroyed. It broke my tiny heart. As a child here in America, I used to listen to classical music on the radio in my room and think of England, think of those forests. I’d sit there and weep. It was very dramatic.

**Well, you are an actress, dear.**

This was even before I was an actress. I was around seven. I was just always very emotional.

**The basis of any artist’s work, no matter what form it takes, is empathy. Keats called it “negative capability.” You’ve always had that.**

It’s all about connecting, about bonding. I think that’s why I’ve been put through the experience of

almost dying so many times. Through each experience I have learned something, and that is to have, yes, more empathy, more compassion, more understanding, about what it must be like for people who are really sick.

**One of the things you bring to the fight against AIDS is the authority of your many illnesses. You're not just some dilettante actress trying to increase her fame. How are you feeling these days? You look great. Amazingly so.**

I feel terrific. I can't stay up late. But that's OK. I just love crawling into bed. I've got a collection now of beautiful sheets. I have a beautiful bedroom. I decided that if I'm going to be sick, then I'm going to have a gorgeous bedroom. I mean, when they told me I had a two-and-a-half-inch brain tumor, I actually said, "Here we go again." The reason they found out—and thank God they did, God moves in mysterious ways—is because I'd had a seizure. I wouldn't have known!

**I've never been cut on, myself. I'm not even circumcised.**

God! If I added up all my scars!

**Physical and emotional?**

Yeah!

**Someone told me that the Aaron Diamond Institute's Dr. David Ho had a lot to do with saving your life during your 1990 bout with a pulmonary virus.**

He did! I can't remember the exact continuity of the story because I had a temperature of 106. He said that he wanted to put me on life support, but first he said they needed to do an open-lung biopsy so they can go in and take sections of my lung and put them under a microscope. They couldn't diagnose at first which particular virus or bacteria it was, so they couldn't give me the appropriate antibiotics.

David was just sitting with me after that and sort of making me breathe, consciously breathe, because if I had stopped, that would have been all she wrote. Then he got some needed information and went into action. Everybody started buzzing around me.

All of a sudden, I'm unconscious and a machine was breath for me. I woke up in the intensive-care ward with tubes coming out of my throat, my nose, by chest, my ribs, my feet, my wrists. It looked like little fish swimming by in this one tube in my neck, but they were little pieces of flesh. When you're that delirious you can kind of trip out so I thought they were fish!

Another thing that was so funny was when they had to give me an intravenous blood transfusion. I was so scared because this was seven years ago, and they still were not sure about how clean blood transfusions were. I did not want to have one out-of-the-drawer. But I had to have it. I saw this one bag of red blood. The nurse I had, I knew very well. Her name's Cathy. By that point she

was like an old friend. I thought Cathy had put lace around the bag and put little sequins on it to kind of camp it up and make it really kitsch. I said, “Cathy, oh, you’re too much. That’s so sweet.” It made me laugh and took away my fear of the blood transfusion. I had that for about three days. Cathy just kind of smiled at me.

Three years later, on yet another visit to the hospital, I brought it up again with her and told her how sweet that had been, and how campy it was. She said, “Elizabeth, I have to finally tell you that I didn’t do that. You were delirious. That was in your imagination.” But it was a way of keeping me calm.

**A sense of camp calms your nerves?**

Yeah.

**Are you afraid of death?**

No. I’m afraid of pain.

**Were you shocked when you awoke from your latest surgery and saw yourself as a bald woman?**

I was so surprised when I came to and looked at my head in the mirror. I asked, “Is my head all flat in the back?” They said I had a beautifully shaped head. But I said, “Are you sure it’s not a cushion head?”

**You’ve been able to keep your sense of humor through all your illnesses. So, thank God, have gay men through this AIDS epidemic. All those affected by AIDS have shown enormous strength in the face of adversity, but gay men in particular have proven that we’re not as vain and selfish as others have always made us out to be.**

A lot of people are selfish, Kevin.

**I know that. But we as a sociological group don’t have the institutions that straight people have that assist in alleviating selfishness—child rearing, marriage…**

Marriage can be a very selfish institution.

**Oh, it can, can it? I take it you are speaking now as the expert that you are on the subject. What are your feelings about same-sex marriage?**

As a matter of fact, I’m not for marriage *of any kind.*

**So you don’t think you’ll ever get married again? Or are you one of those never-say-never people?**

At this point in time, I’m saying never. Never again! I don’t see why anybody of the same sex or of the opposite sex in this day and age needs to get married. I was old-fashioned in that I always thought I had to get married. But that’s so passé now, so I don’t have to do that anymore.

**You can live with a man now.**

All I have to do is try and find somebody.

**You’re still a catch. I don’t think you’ll have any trouble.**

Find me someone!

**What do you think your affinity for gay men has been about? You’ve always been very friendly with a whole coterie of gay men. Was it your refuge from your being such a heterosexual goddess?**

No, not at all. I never even thought of it.

**Does the term “fag hag” upset you? Do you think that’s an awful term?**

I do. I think it’s a really horrible expression. I’ve had great friendships with men who happen to be homosexual.

**I just thought that within those homosexual friendships, a great beauty like you could find a way to relax that was not afforded to her anywhere else in this town. God knows, you must have been hit on constantly.**

I don’t think it had anything to do with that. I always knew what I wanted in that regard, and what I didn’t want. I was always exclusive in my head. Somebody hitting on me made no difference to me.  Unless I was interested in them, they could go take a Flying F. I’m not one to be pushed around.

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