



Fearless Compassion

Mel England reflects on actress Sally Kirkland's legacy and her advocacy for people living with HIV.

May 18, 2026 By Mel England

Twenty years ago, I arrived in Los Angeles and met Sally Kirkland at the Hollywood premiere of *Adam & Steve*, written and directed by my friend Craig Chester. She was so kind and looked in my eyes like I was the only person on earth. I left thinking I'd probably never see her again.

In 2008, I was diagnosed with cancer. Ten years earlier, I'd almost died of AIDS-related causes, so my new diagnosis came as a shock. I was just getting my life and career back.

I told Craig, "If I survive, I'm going to make that movie I wrote!" After six months of chemotherapy and radiation, I was cancer-free! I called Craig and told him the good news, and he said, "So now you're making your movie, right?" I wondered who could play my mother, and he said, "Call Sally Kirkland!"

I left a script for her to read. She called the next day and said, "I love your script. I'll do it!" It was the beginning of my nearly 20-year relationship with the acting legend. Sadly, we never ended up making that movie, but I made another film in which Sally plays my mom. *Here We Are* is currently in postproduction and will be out next year.

I was one of the lucky people who got to know and work with Sally. She took me to Academy screenings and parties. So many stories! I discovered that when Sally loved you, she supported you. And she did so with all her heart.

After my cancer scare, I worked on a solo off-Broadway show about surviving AIDS and cancer. Some people in the business warned me it might be a mistake to come out publicly as an AIDS survivor as it wasn't something that was done. I asked Sally what she thought. She told me, "Be fearless."

A few months ago, after Sally passed, Coty Galloway and I were closing down her apartment. We were going through her vast library of books about show business, spirituality and healing, and that's when I learned more about what Sally had done for people living with HIV and AIDS. In the early days of the epidemic, way before the cocktail, we all clung to books by Louise Hay, Marianne Williamson, books on healing people holistically with nutrition.

When I opened up those books in Sally's library, I saw that she had made notes and underlined passages to share as she ministered to people with AIDS who were dying.

Back when doctors were wearing hazmat suits, she'd sign a release so she didn't have to because she wanted to hold people, hug them, love them.

Sally was on the front line of the epidemic. She was there: raising money for amfAR and AIDS Project Los Angeles, along with Elizabeth Taylor and Madonna. She was fearless.

Along with the books, I found a copy of A&U: America's AIDS Magazine with Sally on the cover. Inside, was an interview with the headline "Saint Sally," which was about her advocacy work for people with AIDS. I looked at the date on the cover. It was the December/January 1997 issue. I started getting chills right there in Sally's apartment. That was the same time I was in the hospital thinking I was going to die of AIDS.

And that's when I knew Sally was still right here with me. She had been there all along, cheering me on from my deathbed, then cheering me on to be fearless, to be a revolutionary for love.

And that's what Sally is saying to all of us right now. "Be fearless. Be a revolutionary for love."

Thank you, dear Sally. I love you.

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