Sheryl Lee Ralph Wins an Emmy Award

The longtime HIV advocate sang during her thank-you speech.

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HIV-positive characters and AIDS television dramas might have been absent from the 74th Primetime Emmy Awards, but the HIV community still had reason to cheer: Longtime HIV advocate and first-time Emmy nominee Sheryl Lee Ralph won the Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series.

The actress, 65, who took home the award for her role as kindergarten teacher Barbara Howard in Abbott Elementary, began her speech by singing—no, belting—lines from the Dianne Reeves song "Endangered Species."

"I am an endangered species," Ralph sang, "but I sing no victim's song. I am a woman, I am an artist, and I know where my voice belongs."

She then stated, "To anyone who has ever, ever had a dream and thought your dream wasn't, wouldn't, couldn't come true, I am here to tell you that this is what believing looks like. This is what striving looks like. And don't you ever, ever give up on you."

Television viewers who have watched Ralph for decades—as matriarch Dee Mitchell in family sitcom Moesha and Felicia Hollingsworth in season 2 of the cancer-themed comedy One Mississippi, for example—may have been surprised that she sang. But not Broadway fans. Ralph originated the role of Deena Jones in the 1983 musical Dreamgirls (Beyoncé played Jones in the movie version), for which she was nominated for a Tony Award (Ralph lost to costar Jennifer Holliday).

Throughout her career, Ralph has made the time to champion HIV awareness. In a 2007 profile, "Call Me Miss Ralph," in POZ, she jokingly referred to herself as in the running for "the most fabulous AIDS diva ever to wear a red ribbon." She told POZ that by the time Dreamgirls closed in 1985, she estimated that one third of the cast and crew had died of AIDS-related illness, including the director, Michael Bennett.

In 1990, she founded The D.I.V.A. (Divinely Inspired Victorious Award) Foundation to fight HIV stigma and raise awareness. And in 2018, Ralph was honored for her AIDS activism with an award at the annual 365 Black Awards presented by McDonald’s.

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