30 Years of AIDS on “The Golden Girls”

UPDATE: R.I.P. Betty White — The HIV-themed episode “72 Hours” debuted on February 17, 1990.

February 17, 2020 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

UPDATE: Betty White passed away on Friday, December 31. She was 99 years old. The actress would have celebrated her 100th birthday on January 17. This 2020 blog post celebrates her tackling the subject of AIDS while on The Golden Girls.

As a fan of The Golden Girls, I have always held one episode dear to my heart. That episode now marks 30 years since it first aired. The HIV-themed “72 Hours” debuted on February 17, 1990. It was episode 19 of season five of the show.

For the uninitiated, the show is a half-hour situation comedy about four older women who share a home in Miami. Beatrice Arthur plays Dorothy, Betty White plays Rose, Rue McClanahan plays Blanche, and Estelle Getty plays Sophia, Dorothy’s mother.

Dorothy is the smart one, Rose is the nice one, Blanche is the sexy one and Sophia is the old one. (A paraphrased description of them by Rose from another episode.) So it is surprising that Rose, not Blanche, is faced with having to get an HIV test.

Rose got a transfusion during surgery to remove her gall bladder. She receives a letter in the mail from the hospital where she had her surgery to come in for a test, since the blood she received may have had HIV, a more pressing concern back then.

After she gets the test, Rose is told she has to wait 72 hours for her results (hence the title of the episode). The bulk of the episode is how she and her housemates deal with the waiting. The possibility of Rose having HIV stirs up lots of emotions.

Deep into a conversation between Rose and Blanche (watch the video above for a clip of this scene), a heated exchange takes place that seals the deal for me about the importance of this episode:

> Rose: Damn it, why is this happening to me?! This isn’t supposed to happen to people like me. You must have gone to bed with hundreds of men, all I had was one innocent operation...
>
> Blanche: Hey, wait a minute, are you saying this should be me and not you?!
>
> Rose: No, no, I’m just saying that I’m a good person. Hell, I’m a goody two shoes!

> Blanche: AIDS is not a bad person’s disease, Rose. It is not God punishing people for their sins!
>
> Rose: You’re right, Blanche —
>
> Blanche: Well you’re damn straight I’m right!

Cue my waterworks. Over the years, that scene, while making me emotional, has comforted me countless times with its simple acknowledgement of our humanity as people living with HIV.

While that scene is particularly dramatic, the episode delivers on the funny too. In just one example, it turns out that Blanche did have an HIV test:

> Rose: Blanche, when you were tested, how did you make it through?
>
> Blanche: Just kept it to myself and acted like a real bitch to everybody else —
>
> Rose: No wonder we never knew!

Thirty years later, HIV tests are quick and life spans are virtually normal for those of us on effective treatment. Much has changed, so it is all the more remarkable that episode tackled AIDS stigma and discrimination six years before effective treatment.

Kudos to The Golden Girls for seeing us at a time when so many others looked the other way.

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