Award Winning Actress Sheryl Lee Ralph Joins Change the Pattern Initiative [VIDEO]

New initiative brings major displays of the AIDS Memorial Quilt to communities in twelve Southern states honoring Black and Brown lives lost to AIDS and sharing their stories through the Quilt.

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Emmy-Award winning actress Sheryl Lee Ralph joined together with Mississippi HIV/AIDS community leaders and advocates to launch the first major Southern display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt as part of Change the Pattern, a new initiative by the National AIDS Memorial and Southern AIDS Coalition to reimagine the fight to end HIV/AIDS in the South.

Ralph was announced as a celebrity ambassador for the program which is bringing sections of the Quilt to communities across twelve Southern states to honor Black and Brown lives lost to AIDS. Funded through a $2.4 million grant by Gilead Sciences and supported by community partners, Change the Pattern is a call to action which aims to disrupt systemic issues that impede health equity and continue to disproportionately impact communities of color and marginalized populations through Quilt displays, quilt-making, educational programming, and advocacy.

“The AIDS Memorial Quilt has been a powerful voice for justice and activism for 35 years. Even so, the stories of Black and Brown lives lost to AIDS have not always been told. But now, we are changing the pattern,” said Ralph, who stood near a Quilt section she helped make with friends at the New Bethel AME Church in 2012 honoring Black entertainers. “Let’s take control of our own health, educate our communities, and advocate for our future. By sharing our stories on this quilt, we honor and celebrate the ones we love.”

Ralph attended the opening ceremony for the Change the Pattern exhibition at the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. It’s one of more than a dozen locations in Jackson, Hattiesburg and the Delta featuring Quilt sections from Mississippi and the South that are on public display from September 28 – October 4, connecting personal stories of the Quilt to the crisis that persists today.

During the event Ralph released a public service announcement for the initiative that encourages the public to take action. “Today, the South faces a crisis, as HIV rates are disproportionately high, and the issues of health, social, and environmental justice continue to impact us every single day,”

she says. “It’s time to Change the Pattern. We can and must reimagine the fight to end HIV and the stigma that persists.”

A passionate health advocate and honored AIDS activist, Ralph is the founding director of the DIVA (Divinely Inspired Victoriously Anointed) Foundation, which she created in memory of the many friends she has lost to HIV/AIDS. She has been a long-time supporter of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, having made panels in remembrance, attended major displays on the mall in Washington, DC, and participated in quilt-making workshops to raise greater awareness about prevention, stigma and justice.

“For over 30 years, Sheryl Lee Ralph has been a fearless warrior in the fight to end HIV and other health disparities in the Black and Brown communities,” said Duane Cramer, who leads community engagement for the National AIDS Memorial and is a self-identified Black, same gender loving man living with HIV. “She head-on confronts the racism, stigma, homophobia and other social injustices like HIV criminalization which contribute to the rising rates of new HIV infections in the South for Black women and men who have sex with men.”

From bringing characters to life on screen, performing on Broadway, producing, and landing the title of national bestselling author with her literary debut, to her deep-rooted philanthropic endeavors, which touch lives across the world, Ralph has become a staple in the entertainment industry, with an acclaimed career spanning over three decades. She was recently honored with an Emmy Award for her role in ABC’s hit comedy series “Abbott Elementary.”

“We are so honored to have Sheryl Lee Ralph lend her voice and advocacy to this important initiative to reach communities in the South most impacted by HIV today,” said Dafina Ward, Executive Director of Southern AIDS Coalition. “By bringing the community together, providing support for each other, and raising awareness through advocacy, together, we make a positive impact and eliminate this epidemic in the South.”

In 2020, the South comprised 38% of the U.S. population but represented over half of new HIV diagnoses. The disproportionate burden of HIV in the South is experienced among certain populations, such as Black women, Black and Latinx gay and bisexual men, and Black and Latinx transgender women. Many Southern states rank in the top 15 with the highest rates of HIV in the country, with Mississippi having the sixth-highest rate. Racism, HIV stigma, homophobia, poverty, and barriers to health care continue to drive these disparities.

Learn more about Change the Pattern at: ChangeThePattern.org.

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