# R.I.P. Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher, Early HIV/AIDS Allies

The actress-icons died just one day apart from each other.

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With last week's deaths of actress-icons Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher—just one day apart from each other—the world lost not only two great talents but also two early HIV/AIDS allies.

In June 1983, in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, Debbie Reynolds hosted what was at the time San Francisco's largest AIDS fundraiser, "An Evening With Debbie Reynolds and Friends." Among the more notable "friends" of the event's title were the singer Sylvester, who would later die of AIDS-related illness, and actress Shirley MacLaine.

As David Román notes in his book Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS, the event was produced in less than a month by an all-volunteer staff and raised $43,000 for the San Francisco–based KS Research and Education Foundation, which was founded to educate gay men about Kaposi's sarcoma, a then common indicator of AIDS. (The organization would later become the San Francisco AIDS Foundation.) Following the event, the Bay Area Reporter commented that the event had been "the most successful fundraiser in San Francisco gay history."

In August of the same year, Reynolds appeared alongside Rip Taylor at the Hollywood Bowl in the Los Angeles version of the event, which, writing in the newspaper The Pride after Reynolds's death, Karen Ocamb says was the city's first-ever AIDS benefit. Although Reynolds's frenemy Elizabeth Taylor, through her work with amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, would go on to become more closely associated with the cause of AIDS, Ocamb writes:

"Reynolds was known to always be available, without perks, to lend her name and talent to fighting the AIDS epidemic. And her fondness for the gays never disappeared either, landing the role as Kevin Kline's mother in the satirical 1997 film In & Out, and playing her Emmy-nominated role as Deborah Messing's eccentric mother in NBC's Will & Grace. Her last role was Liberace's mother in the 2013 HBO movie Behind the Candelabra."

Fisher also became involved with AIDS early on. In a 1998 interview with A&U magazine, about her involvement with AIDS, she said, "I've been much more involved personally rather than a big red ribbon wearer." In 1985, she took in her friend Julian as he was dying from AIDS-related illness. Julian stayed in her guest room for two months as he became progressively sicker. Despite the financial burden and struggles with Julian's insurance company, Fisher hired nurses for him.

In the A&U interview, Fisher describes taking Julian to get manicures and pedicures and even taking him to parties in a wheelchair. “People were freaked out,” she said in the interview, “but this was something I learned from my mother, too. You take care of your own.” This was at a time when people didn’t know how the virus was transmitted. Referring to people’s fearful, ignorance-fueled reactions to AIDS, Fisher recalled, “It was like having leprosy in the house.”

During the 1980s and ’90s, Fisher worked directly with AIDS Project Los Angeles, donated to various organizations and even cohosted a fundraiser for amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research.

In 1993, Fisher published the semiautobiographical novel Delusions of Grandma, in which she writes about Cora (a stand-in for Fisher) and her caring for William (a stand-in for Julian), as he dies of complications from AIDS. Two years later, Fisher lost another friend, Michael, to AIDS. She was at his bedside when he was in a coma and even relied on her own experience with drugs to help advise doctors on how best to keep Michael comfortable during his last days.

Despite her intense experiences, Fisher had this to say about death: “I don’t think it’s scary. You’re still living up until you die.” Spoken like someone who lived her life to the fullest.

To read the full A&U interview with Fisher, click here.

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