



# EAST of the RIVER

www.capitalcommunitynews.com September 2007



[<--PREVIOUS PAGE](#)

[Print This Page](#) 

## And Sometimes I Cry

### Sheryl Lee Ralph's Tribute to Women Living with HIV and AIDS

by: B. Michelle Harris

Extra! Extra! Read all about it! On Aug. 25, Sheryl Lee Ralph, Tony Award-nominated actress, playwright, producer, mother, wife and AIDS activist, presented a heartfelt performance of her one-woman play, "And Sometimes I Cry: The Loves, Lives and Losses of Women Infected and Affected by HIV/AIDS." This performance closed out the 2007 Minority Women's Health Summit that was held in Washington, DC.

This month's column is dedicated to all the sisters (and mothers, daughters, aunts, nieces, grandmothers, granddaughters, great grandmothers, great granddaughters and friends) who are living with HIV/AIDS and to those who love them.

#### Sheryl Lee Ralph: A Compassionate Diva

Ralph made a dramatic entrance onstage where she said that 1981 was "the best of times" and "the worst of times" for her. It was the year that she was nominated for a Tony Award for her role in "Dream Girls." It was also the time that many of her dear friends were dying suddenly – of AIDS.

Ralph noted that so many people do not know the difference between the virus – HIV – and the disease – AIDS. She pointed out that AIDS used to be called the "gay disease." It took a few years before the condition was referred to as HIV, or Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Per Ralph, "It was 'human' all along!"

Though Ralph is supportive of men who live with HIV/AIDS, her focus is women since their rate of new infections has surpassed that of men. In addition, women, especially minority women, face greater barriers to treatment and support than do their male counterparts.

#### Chanel's Story

In the first scene, Sheryl Lee Ralph portrayed Chanel, a 45-year-old entrepreneur living with AIDS. Chanel's husband, who was HIV-negative, eventually left her under the pressures of being the caregiver of a loved one in the protracted late stages of AIDS. Chanel said, "Be careful what you pray for." Reaching a size 2 is something many women dream of; however, Chanel yearned for the days when she weighed more but did not have AIDS. Now, she is headed towards size 0. Chanel's story is a cautionary tale for people of all ages and backgrounds to use condoms each and every time they have sexual intercourse to reduce their risk for contracting HIV and AIDS.

#### A Widow's Tale

A widow, married for 52 years to her childhood sweetheart, told her story through Ralph's riveting performance. The widow's husband was not only her spouse, but her best friend. For the five years following her husband's death, she was painfully lonely. She ended up with a "gentleman friend" who had been her late husband's golf buddy. The widow enjoyed sharing memories of her late husband with this gentleman. Finally, after several months of "visiting," he was allowed to stay overnight.

After the friend suddenly left town, she never heard from him again. His sister contacted the widow to tell her that he had died and was cremated. This gentleman left the widow with a legacy, however. She did not learn exactly what this memento was until a visit to her doctor. She presented with flu-like symptoms that simply would not go away. After a

battery of tests, it was discovered that she was HIV positive.

Her response to her doctor's query of whether she had used condoms was that she had no reason for being concerned about pregnancy. To the audience, the widow stated, "Nowadays, it is just like life or death." She added, "Lord, what did I do to deserve this? Why not breast cancer, God? It would be so much easier to talk about. They embrace you with breast cancer – not the AIDS. Why me, God? In a voice as clear as a bell [he answered], 'Why not you?'"

The widow said she learned to pray in a new way: "I want to thank you, God, for giving me the strength to fight this disease."

### **Jeremiah, Not Just a Bullfrog**

Sheryl Lee Ralph quoted several verses from the eighth chapter of Jeremiah. "Behold the voice of the cry of the daughter of my people...for the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black...Is there no balm in Gilead to heal my wounded soul?" Ralph urged the audience to "Make them reconsider the choices they make for themselves. Find your voices to speak up for your sisters who choose to live and not die."

### **The Fourth Wall: A Time for Dialogue**

After presenting the stories of these two beautiful women, Ralph stated that it was time for "breaking the fourth wall." She explained that this was theater-speak for "getting into dialogue" with the audience.

An audience member asked if the play could address young people in high school or college. Ralph responded that the play was always tailored to meet the audience where they were. She added that there were multiple characters through which the lives of various women could be shared.

To another audience member, Ralph responded that in the beginning, she was told to "forget about the churches, especially the black churches." She noted that people believed that churches did not want to address the issue of AIDS or sexuality. She added, "But this summer, I have done more churches."

A suggestion from the audience was that Ralph should take her show to Broadway. Ralph answered, "The audience that needs to hear this message cannot afford to pay the \$75 or \$100 [to attend a show on Broadway]. So right now, I have committed myself to the audience who needs to hear this message."

In response to another person in the audience, Sheryl Lee Ralph noted that she once worked hard to get a name greater than her own to endorse this project. She finally realized that she had it inside herself to make the play a success with the support of God and others working collaboratively with her and with one another. Ralph said, "I stepped out on my own, on faith, especially since I am a woman of faith."

"Sometimes I Cry" has now been in existence for 18 months. Ralph thanked Frances Ashe-Goins and her associates of the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, for the invitation to participate in the 2007 Minority Women's Health Summit. The National Medical Association cosponsored this event.

Ralph reminded us of when Gwen Ifill interviewed Dick Cheney and asked him about his thoughts on the rise in the rates of AIDS in women in America. Cheney responded with, "I have no idea." Ralph ended the evening with, "This silence, this shame will kill us."

### **Make a Difference**

To learn more about "Sometimes I Cry" or for sponsorship or booking information and to make donations or obtain merchandise with the show's theme, visit [www.SometimesICry.org](http://www.SometimesICry.org). In addition, visit [www.divassimplysinging.com](http://www.divassimplysinging.com) to find out what you can do to support the Diva Foundation, a 501(c) 3 organization founded in 1990 by Ralph as a memorial to her many friends who died from HIV/AIDS and as a tribute to men, women and children living with HIV/AIDS.

To learn more about the 2007 Minority Women's Health Summit and the Office on Women's Health, read next month's edition of this column or visit the Office on Women's Health Web sites at [www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov) and [www.girlshealth.gov](http://www.girlshealth.gov). For information on HIV and AIDS, search those Web sites. In the District of Columbia, visit [www.dc.gov](http://www.dc.gov) and search under HIV or AIDS. In the District of Columbia, call the AIDS Hotline at 202-332-AIDS or 202-

332-2437.

Stop the silence!

*Dr. Harris is assistant professor at the University of the District of Columbia. Her focus is public and community health through education, information, and research. Contact her at [bharris@udc.edu](mailto:bharris@udc.edu).*