

Sheryl Lee Ralph Honored by Project Angel Food for Decades of HIV Activism

Lily Tomlin presented the “Abbott Elementary” star with the inaugural Sheryl Lee Ralph Legacy Award at Project Angel Food’s fundraiser.

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Emmy Award-winning actress Sheryl Lee Ralph was honored at Project Angel Food’s 2023 Awards Gala for her long-standing support as an [AIDS activist](#). The event raised \$750,000 for the Los Angeles organization, which prepares and delivers healthy meals to people impacted by serious illnesses, including [HIV](#).

Fellow actress Lily Tomlin presented the inaugural Sheryl Lee Ralph Legacy Award to Ralph for her participation and commitment to Project Angel Food throughout the last 30 years, according to the [organization’s website](#).

“Sheryl Lee Ralph is a force of nature,” Tomlin said at the event. “And when she walks into a room, she brings her own damn spotlight, and she has used that light to stand up for the HIV/AIDS community when few would, and she has used it to right social injustice, to fight ignorance and to advocate for change.... Sheryl Lee Ralph has exemplified an unwavering commitment to assisting those in need, particularly through her profound involvement with Project Angel Food.”

Additionally, Tomlin shared a congratulatory letter written by Vice President Kamala Harris.

“I never ever dreamed that someone would be naming an award after me and then put the word ‘legacy’ behind it,” Ralph said during her acceptance speech.

The Abbott Elementary star recalled her 1981 Broadway debut in Dream Girls and the impact of the AIDS epidemic. “And out of all the wonderful things we did with Dreamgirls, nobody ever mentioned the fact that we lost one third of our original company to AIDS.

“They were good people,” Ralph continued. “They were kind people. Creative people. You would sing and dance with them one night, then they would be fighting for their life the next. And I said, ‘What am I watching here, God?’ and ‘Why am I having to see this in America?’”

She recalled being told to shut up and that she wouldn't have much of a career because she was spending time with "those people."

"Yeah, they were wrong," she said.

Attendees at the gala event included Olympic gold medalist Greg Louganis and artist and author Mary Fisher, both of whom are living with HIV and are longtime advocates. Other attendees included Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter Jewel, original Queer Eye guy Jai Rodriguez, actor Steven Weber, author David Kessler and many more.

"The Angel Awards Gala has always represented community, joy, unity of purpose and a demonstration of what is possible when we call on you—our most cherished angels—and you answer in such resounding and inspiring generosity," Project Angel Food CEO Richard Ayoud said at the event.

In related news, Ralph was a keynote speaker at last month's [U.S. Conference on HIV/AIDS \(USCHA\)](#) in Washington, DC and [Louganis recently auctioned off his Olympic medals for an HIV charity](#). And for a bit of history, read this [1994 POZ cover story by Maureen Dowd on Mary Fisher](#), who rocked the 1992 Republican National Convention by disclosing her HIV status from the podium.