



ROSARIO DAWSON, *Actor and Political Activist*

Using Fame and Fortune to Help Others

I GREW UP IN A SQUAT ON the Lower East Side. My mom was 17 when she had me, 18 when she got married and 21 when she broke into the abandoned building. She was a courageous person, always saying to herself, "OK, I'm going to learn how to be a plumber so I can put plumbing lines in, sewage lines in." My dad had done some construction already, and they learned how to do electrical work so they could set up the electricity in the house. I grew up knowing that if you wanted something better, you had to do it yourself.

Members of my family had HIV, and I was very aware of their mortality and how a little cold that I had meant that I couldn't be around them because it could cost them their

lives. So when I read the script for "Kids," I thought it was really powerful. I had never thought about acting before, but it really spoke to me in so many ways, very much mirrored the life that I had around me.

As for my activism, it doesn't always have to be superpersonal to me. But I do have a hard time saying no, because it's easy to find someone in your family who has cancer or HIV or has suffered extreme poverty or homelessness. It's all right there.

I never had any walls up or had any particular idea of what success should look like, and I wasn't acting to go for success; I was just enjoying myself. But I think in both parts of my life, acting and my activism, I'm starting to focus more.

I really want to be doing meaningful things. I think that comes with being 29. That's a natural progression. I was walking in marches with my mom when I was 10, back when Al Sharpton still wore sweatsuits.

It took a long time for me to realize how to commit that celebrity value to something that I really believed in. I don't want to just be the spokesperson for something; I want to be affected by it as well.

Growing up in New York

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helped me so much because you walk one block in a different direction and you're in a completely different environment with very different attitudes, very different cultures, very different wants and needs.

I wanted to get involved with the Lower Eastside Girls Club because I was discovered on my stoop on the Lower East Side. Some of the young girls will come up to me and say, "Oh, you're so lucky! It's so amazing. What can I do to get out of here?" Am I going to tell them, "Sit around on your stoop and get discovered?" I can't do that. But I do say, "There is inherent value here. Look around at the people around you. I learned so much from growing up here. And there are great people who have come from here. So let's learn about them." That's what the Lower Eastside Girls Club is about. I didn't have a place like that to go to when I was younger. There's such a huge dropout rate, a huge teen-pregnancy rate, and people weren't addressing that. It's about recognizing and developing the community around you; you have the power to do that.

I always tell people: use your passion. Does your mom have Alzheimer's? Can your brother not afford school? Has an uncle come back from the war hurt? Are you afraid that you don't have health care? Is the neighborhood around you in shambles? Those are the things to invest yourself in politically because then you have something that's personally feeding you.

If you have something that makes you filled up, that you're already caring about, that you're already talking about, then you'll actually see progress. You're just feeding off that energy.

If we all listened to that little voice and we all worked to help that little thing that we know, then the whole world would be a different place, and we all would be doing our part.

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