



Brushes with greatness

Sometimes interactions with famous people can make you re-evaluate your criteria of stardom

by Denise Becker

I have probably had so many so-called brushes with greatness that I sometimes feel like an extra on my own stage of life. I've met Elton John, Jimmy Connors, Bjorn Borg, Colin James, Vicki Gabereau—even the Queen!

I met my heartthrob, David Cassidy, when I was 21. I asked him to sign my dinner theatre program. When he found out my name, he began to sing the Blondie song, "Denise, Denise, I'm so in love with you..." Can it get much better than that? Well, yes, if you're a Bryan Adams fan. Bryan was signing autographs in a Chapters bookstore. Hating to queue up for anything, I decided to catch him on his way in to the store. As he stepped out of the limo, I shouted, "Bryan, I need your autograph!"

"Sorry, you'll have to join the line-up inside," he replied.

Undaunted, I pleaded, "But, Bryan, my husband's waiting for his tea!"

"You cheeky devil," he laughed as he came over to sign my CD.

But as my world has changed, and as I've faced living with HIV I've gotten pickier about who I classify as a great person. I believe that true greatness is embodied in those who have made a difference to the world, often despite seemingly insurmountable odds. By that standard, my list of brushes with greatness gets very, very short.

Stephen Lewis, the UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, definitely makes the cut. I met him in Vancouver last year. His love for his job despite his personal struggle with depression and grief makes him a true hero in my eyes. A humble man, he was embarrassed by all the attention he was receiving and gladly came to sit at our table to discuss HIV, women, and children. It was the thrill of a lifetime to meet him and he showed genuine interest in what was being done at a local level to help people with HIV. He made us feel like *we* were the celebrities.

I also met Dr. Jonathan Mann, AIDS activist and researcher, and the first director of the World Health Organization's Global Programme on AIDS. He was a philosopher who could see the future of AIDS and the terrible pandemic it was becoming. He saw how the AIDS movement was falling apart from divisiveness and infighting. His message was solidarity. While at a conference on

children with HIV in England in November 1996, he and his then fiancée, Dr. Mary Lou Clements, came over to speak to me. They commended me for speaking out about women and children with HIV. Tragically, they were killed in the ill-fated Swiss Air Flight 111, which crashed off Peggy's Cove in Nova Scotia in 1998.

But my most cherished brush with greatness is with Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel of Boston University. Wiesel was just 15 when he and his family went to Auschwitz. He wrote about his experience in his book, *Night*, and went on to become the founding Chairman of the US Holocaust Memorial Council and the chairman of The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity. Wiesel has used his fame to plead for justice for oppressed peoples in the Soviet Union, South Africa, Vietnam, Biafra, and Bangladesh.

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I once wrote to Wiesel, and in his reply he wrote that my story was a sad one and added, "the strength and hope you display are inspiring." I was dumbfounded to discover that this man was inspired by my story. To receive such words from my hero gave me strength.

That letter from Wiesel made me realize that we all have the ability to be stars on the stages of our lives and that, quite possibly, the people we meet along the way are the extras who can help us make our own stories into great ones. And we all have that potential. As Lloyd Bridges said in the film *Cousins*: "Sometimes you just have to make chicken soup out of chicken shit." ☺

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