



Class Act

Through live portrayals of historical women, actor Sheryl Faye makes connections for young people.

BY KILEY JACQUES

Performer Sheryl Faye makes an impact—a heartfelt, thought-provoking impact that leaves a tear in many an eye. Whether she's portraying Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, or Clara Barton, there's

not an audience member who isn't riveted by the story she tells.

The Emerson graduate launched this aspect of her acting career in 2003, when she joined a Chicago-based theatre company that

worked with Boston actors performing historical characters. That company wrote the Helen Keller and Clara Barton shows that Faye now performs as part of her one-woman show repertoire. She wrote the Eleanor Roosevelt show, and she presents all three in elementary schools throughout the North Shore and beyond.

"I have grown to admire these women so much," says Faye, who not only brings them to life but also ties their stories to contemporary issues facing children, like bullying.

Relating her performances to aspects of their curriculum, like history and social studies, is also part of Faye's aim, but it's the conversations she has with students about things like self-empowerment that really motivate her. "All of these women really overcame obstacles to get where they got in life. It's still a relevant message for children today."

With each character, she takes a different approach to making those connections. Helen Keller's condition, Faye points out, made her different. "Kids these days are often made to feel that being different is a bad thing," she says. "I try to reassure them that being different is a good thing and that we are all different." She also gets them thinking about their own strength and capacity to achieve. "Helen Keller never gave up—I think that is also a really important message."

Eleanor Roosevelt, Faye demonstrates, paved the way as first lady, inspiring future first ladies to take on a cause. Making good choices is another theme she stresses with that show. "She always did what was right in her heart," notes Faye. "She had a whole nation watching her—sometimes they'd agree, sometimes they wouldn't. But it didn't matter to her. She always did what she felt to be right and true." And Clara Barton championed women as nurses, bringing us the American Red Cross. "It was a lot of firsts for all of these women, and I think it is a great [lesson] for children. I always try to tie it to the Q & A session," says Faye, who hopes her shows are not just educational but also entertaining.

Before going into a school, she sends teaching materials to educators that provide a list of ways her shows can complement their curricula. Often, she is invited to per-

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form in conjunction with the time students are reading biographies. "A lot of times they come [to see me] with a bit of knowledge about the character, which is great because it really brings it to life for them."

There's a fair bit of research that goes into developing a character. Faye looks to biographies, letters, personal accounts, films, and social media for information that will help shape the role. In the case of Eleanor Roosevelt, she also visited her home to gain a deeper appreciation for her life. "As an actor, I want to live, eat, and breathe this person and discover them as much as possible." That work and dedication come through in every show. She truly embodies the women she so respects.

This fall, she is adding Laura Ingalls Wilder. "I think the moms are even more excited than the



Faye researches biographies, letters, and all forms of media to help develop her characters.

children. Everyone loves her. And it will be nice to bring a woman writer into the mix." She hopes this character will encourage kids to write about their personal experiences—"to have the courage to put it down on paper."

Though the performances typically take place in elementary schools, Faye sometimes visits senior centers, libraries, and historical societies. The Helen Keller show is popular with all audiences. "She is someone who touches every heart of every age," notes Faye.

But it is the children she enjoys most. Her shows often get them wanting to read more; she teaches them new ways to think about their social behavior; and she demonstrates how others have overcome obstacles. "I feel like I have an impact, and that makes me feel wonderful." **njs**

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