

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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*Compassion is  
substance of life*

By ALENA CYBART

I met the “ambassador of compassion” in the fight against AIDS, and she had much to say to today’s college student. So much, in fact, that I cannot possibly do her message justice in the space of one column. But I am willing to try.

Mary Davis Fisher spoke at International House recently, and more people than just those in attendance on 123rd Street needed to hear her words.

Although some know her as the founder of the Family AIDS Network, Fisher is best remembered for her words on August 19, 1992, when she addressed the Republican Convention and its worldwide television audience of millions.

Publications describe her as bringing the “convention floor to silence and tears,” but her articulated thoughts elicited more than emotional responses then and still do today. Her speech this February was equally thought-provoking.

“Our life’s worth is not measured in length but in substance,” Fisher said as I sat in the far back of a darkened auditorium. It was that sentence more than anything else that stuck with me when she finished speaking.

As a spokesperson who promotes awareness of the AIDS epidemic and urges the population to be tested, especially young adults, Fisher draws upon her own experiences of suffering and perseverance in her presentations. She has AIDS; but though her life might end sooner than many of ours, she will not be remembered for longevity. She will, however, be noted for what she did. In that auditorium, what she did was make me think.

People seem to forget substance and instead live for the elusive world of “one day when.” Classmates say, “one day when I’m a teacher I’ll make a difference in people’s lives,” “one day when I’m a doctor my practice will save lives,” or right on campus, “one day when I have a real job I’ll be productive.”

What we do every day can make a difference and constitute productivity if we make the effort. We have to start somewhere, and today is just as good—actually better than as tomorrow—for cultivating that substance.

So what exactly is it we do that creates substance? A good deed done just to make us feel better is one way of looking at it, but I prefer to think of the “substance” in my life as those things I did which were meaningful, improved a situation, or “righted” a wrong.

Mary Fisher’s substance is raising her two sons the best way she knows how in a world that can seem cruel and frightening, in addition to spreading knowledge concerning AIDS everywhere she can.

While we can’t all do that (nor would many of us want to), we can head organizations, address injustices, or simply recognize problems that need to be fixed. But before we solve any difficulties we need to first acknowledge them.

As I thought of how I could capture the essence of Fisher’s words in this brief space, I saw a bus on Broadway with an advertisement something along the lines of “Red ribbons won’t cure AIDS. Research will.” Obviously a piece of cloth is not the same as a test tube, but some don’t even consider AIDS anything to worry about. Others think it won’t happen to them. No one will devote time and money to a concern that isn’t accepted as important.

At least the prevalence of red ribbons on celebrities and normal folks alike shows the world that a problem like AIDS is worthy of

attention. That is another example of Fisher's substance: showing the world it needs to acknowledge this disease.

Whatever the method, each of us has the awesome potential in our lives with which to do some fantastic things.

This isn't an idealistic, super-optimistic way of viewing the world, but a rational, thoughtful style of living that one brave woman has embraced. For someone who is more keenly aware than most of us that her time on this earth is limited, Fisher expressed an idea that young, carefree, fun-loving men and women often have a hard time accepting: death comes for everyone.

Although we can't escape it, we can learn to think of it as the ultimate deadline for all we hope to accomplish. It's never too soon to start making substance.

***“Our life's worth is not measured in length but in substance.”***

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