

Political Diva

Sheryl Lee Ralph talks celebrity, marriage and what she loves about Philly.

BY JESSICA GREEN

You may know Sheryl Lee Ralph (now, Ralph-Hughes) from late-1990s hit UPN television show "Moesha," but she's actually an accomplished actress and philanthropist in her own right. The youngest female to graduate from Rutgers University, Ralph originally planned to study medicine before switching gears and becoming an actress. Today she's married to Pennsylvania State Senator Vincent Hughes and splits her time between Philadelphia and her hometown of Los Angeles, where she produces the musical "Mighty Real" and promotes The Diva Foundation, a charity that raises awareness for HIV/AIDS.

What made you switch from studying medicine to professional acting?

Believe it or not, it was organic chemistry. It really just turned me off. I'll never forget walking into that class with this huge hare laying on my table, ready to be dissected and this shiny scalpel they gave me. That was it.

You were living in Los Angeles when you married your husband. How did you meet?

When I met him I was actually on Broadway in New York doing a musical called "Thoroughly Modern Millie" about 14 or 15 years ago. We were set up on a blind date. Two years before that, a friend of mine who was the Vice President of Diversity at Paramount said to me, "you have to meet my friend the senator, he's one of the greatest guys ever." But we just never crossed paths. Later on, he comes to New York, he and I meet, and that was that. When we got engaged, he gave me a light blue box with a white ribbon with an almanac for the state inside. The note read, "so that you

will know more about all the things I really love." That to me spoke volumes; he is a man who truly loves Philly and the state of Pennsylvania.

What is it like to be married to a political figure?

For me, as an actress and entertainer, it's very schizophrenic. There are outfits in California that I might wear as a celebrity, but not as a politician's wife. I'm very aware of who I am in Pennsylvania and am aware that there is a difference, so I just work on that. It seems to work well for the two of us, and I don't feel any real constraints.

You commute between Los Angeles and Philadelphia. When you are in Pennsylvania, where do you settle in?

Home is West Philadelphia. I call Vincent the real Fresh Prince, he was born and raised there. The only time I cross over to the other side is when I'm in Saks Fifth Avenue or Lord and Taylor because everyone knows me by my name, and I just love that they care so much.

What is your favorite thing to do in Philadelphia?

I love Honeygrow; I like to experiment there. On a late Friday or Saturday night, I love Sid Booker's Shrimp Corner. It's a hole in the wall, but they have the best fried shrimp ever. Downtown, The Oyster House is perfect in the summer after doing hot yoga at Bikram Yoga. Plus, I really want to get a handle on brunch. I love Sabrina's Café but the lines can be so long.

When you're not in Pennsylvania, what do you miss the most about it (besides your husband)?

I think that Philadelphia—and the whole state of Pennsylvania—is a microcosm of America. You get a little bit of all of America and how the real country feels. A lot of people say that Philly is stuck in the shadow of New York City and DC and that's not the case at all; Philly is just booming with possibility all the time. There's a vibrancy about the people that is just amazing. You don't see that in a lot of other places.

"Mighty Real" is your latest project. Tell us about it.

It's all about disco. It was versed by the disco queen, an incredible man by the name of Sylvester who was taken away from us all too soon by AIDS. The show is about him returning in concert. Every time we do this show people end up dancing in the aisles, and I feel so good to be a part of the production team. We

did a small workshop at the Painted Bride and it was so great, we're looking to bring it back to Philly soon. But our real destination now is Broadway.

The Diva Foundation is something you created to bring awareness to HIV/AIDS. What do you hope to accomplish with it?

We are based in Los Angeles, but we have small chapters of women in Philadelphia, Houston, and up and down California; they call themselves DIVAS. I just brought my daughter on board so I'm really hoping that someday she and my son will take it over because I believe that men and women have to be involved in the conversation with their children about health, well-being and sex.

You often promote self-growth, so tell us, where will Sheryl Lee Ralph-Hughes grow next?

I just think about living the happiest, most fulfilled life that I can. I would really love to see and develop some projects that help young people in Philadelphia really grasp the idea that they can move beyond poverty. When it comes to my art, I'm looking for another series, I'm looking for more film and the musicals that will come after "Mighty Real" because I see that making its way. I want my kids to grow up healthy and my husband to be happy.