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‘Activism is what I do to stay alive’



Tom Archdeacon

The first time he got what’s now become an oh-so-familiar warning was back here in Dayton when he was just a kid:

“Well, your (butts) are in trouble now!”

As he recalled that moment from 60 years past, his blue eyes twinkled with satisfaction.

Martin Sheen – then known by his birth name, Ramon Estevez – had just led his fellow caddies at Dayton Country Club out on strike, not only over their pay, but especially because of the way the young bag-toters were being treated by some of the privileged and profane members.

It was a bold move for any 14-year-old, especially someone’s in Sheen’s situation.

One of 10 children of a poor, Catholic immigrant family that had lived first on K Street by the University of Dayton and then on Brown Street in South Park, he had followed his older brothers to the Oakwood course when he had turned 9.

“We would work from early spring to late fall and I made enough money to help my dad,” he said. “We went to Catholic schools (Holy Trinity grade school) and there was tuition and books and at Chaminade we had to wear ties and clean shirts. You could save between \$250 and \$300 in any given summer and that lessened my dad’s burden.

“But the caddies always complained about the labor and the treatment ... and what is a caddie? Sometime it’s a little kid who weighs 90 pounds carrying a 75-pound bag up and down hills for four hours in the sun. At the time we were paid \$1.75. It increased a little over the years, and if you carried a double for 18 it was \$4.25.

“Some of the golfers were very decent men, but some used really abusive language. It was vulgar and racist and we were just children. But they didn’t even see us working for them.

“I wanted a minimum wage for all of us and I got the support of the other lads. But I said, ‘You know, we’re not gonna get it unless we risk stepping out.’

“My brothers were there, too, and we went out on a Tuesday, which was Ladies Day. We just had kind of a stand-in in the parking lot and finally the caddie master came out and said, ‘Well, your (butts) are in trouble now. You better change your mind.’”

Most of the group continued the strike into the next day when lawyers and doctors played.

“My brother and I were the last holdouts,” Sheen laughed. “He only did it because I said, ‘Let’s see how far we can go.’”

Eventually all the caddies were lured back in and young Martin was fired.

That’s where he learned a lesson that has lasted a lifetime: If you stand up for something you believe in, if you make it truly personal, you often will pay a price.

And since that day in 1955, he’s been standing up ever since.

Along the way he has achieved great fame as an actor. He began on stage (at 24 he was nominated for a Tony for his role in “The Subject



More than 1,400 undergraduate University of Dayton students received diplomas during a commencement ceremony last Sunday at UD Arena. Actor Martin Sheen was awarded an honorary doctor of humane letters degree, in recognition of his lifelong commitment to peace, social justice and human rights, the university said in a statement. RANDY RAGSDALE / STAFF

Was Roses”) and since then has amassed more than 200 credits with film (including “Badlands” and “Apocalypse Now”) and television (especially as President Josiah Bartlet on “The West Wing”).

Friday, his new series, Grace and Frankie, debuted on Netflix.

But on his visit to Dayton last weekend – he and Janet, his wife of 53 ½ years, live in California – he put his life into perspective: “Acting is what I do for a living and activism is what I do to stay alive.”

His causes are many – gun violence, war, genocide, capital punishment, anti-abortion, worker’s rights, racism, homelessness, the environment – and often those stands have led to non-violent civil disobedience.

Over the years he said he’s been arrested 66 times. The first came on Good Friday in 1986 when he protested Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars initiative in Times Square. Alongside him that day was Frank Modica, the former Marianist brother and Catholic priest who had been his first homeroom teacher at Chaminade.

Sheen said when his son Charlie was born “there were complications” and he called Modica, then a Brooklyn priest, to the hospital to have the boy baptized right away.

Over the years, Sheen has given his money, his time and his platform to many causes.

“He uses his celebrity status to be a voice for the voiceless,” is how UD President Dan Curran put it last Sunday when the school awarded Sheen an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters for the way he advocates the Marianist values of social justice, service and peace around the world.

As he stepped to the microphone in front of the large crowd that included 1,441 new graduates, Sheen exhaled heavily, visibly overwhelmed by the moment.

“It’s like being canonized,” he finally said with a smile.

Family reunion

Last Saturday, the day before his UD ceremony, Sheen spoke at a workers’ rights event on Chicago’s West Side. Later that afternoon, he was in Dayton for a family reunion.

“Our mom had 12 pregnan-

cies, 10 survived – nine boys and a girl – and now there are just five of us left,” Sheen said. “We decided to stop going to funerals and (instead) see each other when we’re alive.”

His sister Carmen and his brothers Frank, John and Joe, who is also an actor, were on hand, as were sons Emilio and Ramon (both actors), grandson Taylor and many other relatives.

They started the gathering with 4:30 p.m. Mass at St. Joseph Church in downtown Dayton. As they walked up the front steps, Martin said John reminded him this was where their parents had married: “It all started going up these same steps.”

Their dad, Francisco, had come from Galicia, Spain, and their mother, Mary Ann (Phelan), was from County Tipperary, Ireland.

Francisco worked at National Cash Register or, as Sheen referred to it in true Dayton vernacular, “The Cash.” Their mom, a devout Catholic who prayed the rosary every evening after dinner, died when Martin was 11.

At first there was talk of orphanage or foster homes for the brood of kids, but that’s where Holy Trinity, the family’s downtown Dayton parish and school on Bainbridge Street, stepped in: Not just the priests, but especially the Sisters of Notre Dame nuns who taught in the school.

“The sisters were very, very instrumental in every aspect of our lives,” Sheen said. “They were from blue collar families, too. Their fathers were plumbers and truck drivers and brick layers, so they knew where we came from. They understood our problems.

“They were very compassionate, but we didn’t get off the hook for anything. They believed in discipline and expected you to stand up and do your best. But if you faltered or had difficulties, they were there. I’m enormously grateful to them. They were as much my family as my real family.”

Martin was an altar boy at Holy Trinity and became president of the teen club his freshman year at Chaminade. As a junior, he entered a contest for young people at a local TV station, read from the book of Genesis and won a trip to New York City.

After that he was hooked. As soon as he graduated, he planned to return and pursue an acting career.

But his father had dreamed of him going to UD, as three of the other children would.

“I don’t think he made more than \$147 a week, but he supported his family with it and put enough money aside every week for me to attend the university,” Sheen said. “But I was the only one who rejected it. I knew it would be a waste. My vision was blurred.

“It became a great source of tension between us and finally I thought the best way I could convince him I was not university material was to take the entrance exam ... and fail it. And I did, on purpose.

“I understand, to this day, I still hold the record for the lowest (score) in the history of the university. Out of a possible 100, I scored three.”

An assistant pastor at Holy Trinity loaned him money for bus fare and Sheen headed to New York, where he eventually found a \$40-a-week job working as a stock boy for American Express.

At about that same time he adopted his stage name, Sheen coming from Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, the Catholic clergyman who had a popular TV show in the 1950s. He never officially changed it.

He got involved in The Living Theatre, an avant garde troupe, and in 1961 married Janet Templeton, an Ohio art student studying in New York.

Over the years the couple would have four children. Emilio, Ramon and Renee have kept the Estevez last name, while Carlos became Charlie Sheen.

Martin’s latest venture – Grace and Frankie – features him with Sam Waterson, Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin and has the two women as longtime rivals who suddenly find out their husbands are in love.

“I can’t tell you if it will be a success or not, you guys will have to determine that,” Sheen said with a growing smile. “But I’m 74 now and I’m the youngest member of the cast. If we all fulfill our contracts – and live – we’ll be in our 80s by the time the series finishes.”

Spiritual rebirth

Sheen said there was a period in his life – as fame and celebrity and ego took over – where he fell away from the Catholic church. Then came emotional exhaustion and the 1977 heart attack that nearly killed him during the filming of “Apocalypse Now” in the jungles of the Philippines.

“I had felt this great absence in my life and then I became very pious,” he admitted. “I was afraid I was going to die and wouldn’t have the salvation from the church of my youth.”

Still, it wasn’t until May 1981 that he experienced his spiritual rebirth. It came while in Paris after long conversations with Terrence Malick, the producer who had made “Badlands.” Eventually that led Sheen to the only English-speaking Catholic church in the city. There an Irish priest heard his confession and after that, he said, the floodgates opened:

“I came back to the church of Vatican II, the church of activism and social justice, the church of Daniel and Phil Berigan, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and I knew that’s where I belonged.

“As a result, I’ve been (back) 34 years last week. It’s been the most difficult years of my life and equally the happiest. Basically, I just started to lead an honest life. My wife was already living that from the time we met. It took me 20 years to catch up.”

Sheen, a sincere and affable man, is passionately committed to his causes and beliefs and when he talks to you now – in

what can easily turn into a free association, non-stop riff – he may go off on a rant about guns and gun violence, politicians in the pockets of lobbyists or any number of other topics.

And then he catches himself, makes a self-effacing remark, and tempers his thoughts ... for just a moment.

As he accepted his degree Sunday, he quoted the late Robert F. Kennedy from a speech in Cape Town, South Africa:

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest wall of oppression and resistance.”

Longtime Flyer fan

Although Sunday was the first time Sheen had been in UD Arena, he has had a lifelong affinity for the university and the Flyers basketball teams.

“Growing up, UD was omnipresent in our lives,” he said. “We lived a quarter-mile away. The big thing we were all involved in in the 1950s was UD basketball. I can name the first strings.

“Tom Blackburn was the coach. He worked at Dayton Country Club when we caddied so we knew him personally. And there was Don ‘Monk’ Meineke. And Bill Uhl went to school with my brother Mike, who was 5-7 and used to walk with Bill (who was 7-feet).

“He’s a dear sweet man and I’m delighted to hear he’s still with us. He was one of my heroes growing up. And there was Jack Salee and (Chris) Harris, the two guards, and Long John Horan.”

Sheen found a photo of those 1950s Flyers in the Arena and later, as he was headed up to the Boesch Lounge, he stopped in front of an overblown photo of the 1967 Flyers headed from their team hotel – The Kentucky in Louisville – to Freedom Hall to play UCLA in the NCAA Tournament’s title game.

He smiled as he took in some of the faces: Donnie May, standing in front of Jim Wannemacher, and behind both of them, coach Don Donoher.

During episodes of “The West Wing,” Sheen – as President Bartlet – was seen several times drinking out of a Dayton Flyers mug. And he said he’s been aware of the men’s and women’s teams’ runs in the NCAA Tournament the past couple of years.

Sheen is also involved with Wright State University and a couple of years ago he returned to Chaminade Julienne to help with a fundraiser.

Family, though, is his strongest tie back here, and on this trip it all went back to his dad.

At last Saturday night’s reunion, he said his brother, John, narrated a video of family photos set to music:

“I wasn’t prepared for how deeply moving it was. I was reminded of the man my dad was. I ...”

His voice wavered as the emotion welled up.

“I’m sorry, he just resurfaced in a deeply personal way,” he finally said.

“He was a lion in the house. He was from Galicia and he had the very deep Spanish accent ... basso profundo ... but outside he wouldn’t say a word. He was very, very shy. His accent made him feel inferior.

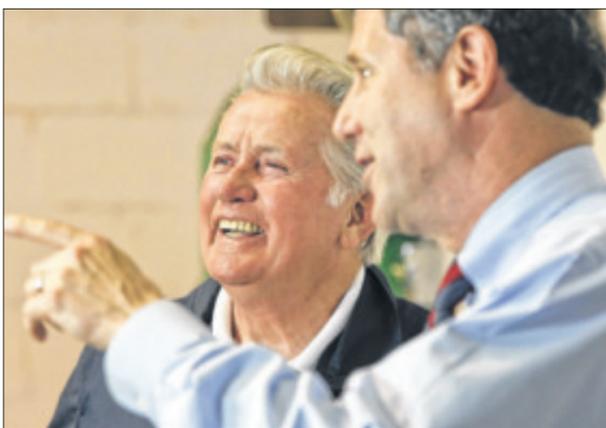
“But he was my first hero. And he remains the best man I have ever known. I adored him and that’s why it was important for me to come here and accept this honor.”

As he spoke from the podium, he briefly told the crowd about his father and then shrugged: “I’m sure he is turning over in his grave just up here at Calvary Cemetery.”

But if his dad was turning, it was only to get a better view of what his boy had become.

As Martin had told his brother back here in the ‘50s: “Let’s see how far this can go.”

And now he was back home, being honored for the same kind of principled stand he showed so long ago when he set down a golf bag and stood up for what he believed.



U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown was joined on the campaign trail in May 2012 by actor, activist and Dayton native Martin Sheen. The two toured The Foodbank in Dayton and packed Good-to-Go bags for needy children.