

**Interview: 15th Annual International AIDS Conference
Richard Gere, AIDS Activist, Actor
July 14, 2004**

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JACKIE JUDD: Richard Gere, thank you for joining us. The focus of your efforts regarding AIDS is mostly India at the moment. Why India?

RICHARD GERE: About 5 years ago I started to look around me and I said, my own person capital means something right now. Where would I be most effective using it? And I really felt HIV/AIDS India. They're right on the cusp. They're about 15 years behind where we were in the U.S. And I said if we can take what I have learned in the process there and with the people who have real knowledge and start to create systems and models that are workable for India that we can have a major effect.

JACKIE JUDD: Was it also the cultural affinity that you felt for India? Because the way you described India you could have said about other countries in terms of being on the cusp of an AIDS epidemic.

RICHARD GERE: No. It was India. I was coming to India anyhow. I'd been going to India 2, 3, 4 times a year since 25 years. It's very close to me. Certainly first with the Tibetan community that lives mostly in the North, Himachal Pradesh near the Himalayas. But the whole, I'm sure I come from here. I'm sure there's some deep affinity that is way beyond what I can possibly remember, but it's there. Probably almost genetic at this point.

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JACKIE JUDD: Given the years that you've put in there, there are obstacles in every country of course to battling AIDS. But are there unique obstacles in India that don't exist elsewhere that you haven't seen elsewhere?

RICHARD GERE: Well, the one thing that we had going for us in the U.S. is we basically are homogenous. We had rich, we had poor, but basically if you spoke one language you almost spoke to everybody. And image wise you could use images in ways of talking. We found clearly that the African American and Chicano communities you had to talk in a different way, but basically you could have one message. There's CBS and NBC and ABC at that point and they communicated to everybody. You don't have that in India. You have 400 languages and you have 1,000 dialects and you have wide cultural variations from North to South and East to West and you have communication systems that aren't nationwide. Each area has their own forms and corporations for communication. You also don't have a strong central government. State governments are more involved with health and similar issues and so health issues are never really driven by the national government here. You have to have your relationships with separate states. So part of the work that we've been doing is actually trying to set up separate systems. Like we're inventing a whole new universe with each area in India that we start to work with. But I think the models work. I think we've reached a model definition that is applicable

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almost everywhere we've worked.

JACKIE JUDD: Does the model work in each region despite the language differences, the cultural differences?

RICHARD GERE: The model does. We just have to plug in what is, the model I've been working with starts from my strengths, which is the immediate connection to the creative community wherever I am. In the North it's Delhi and that area, in the South, the beginning of the South would be Mumbai, Bombay and that's their film community, but the other part of the South is Tamilnadu, which is based pretty much in Chini. And that's a whole other language. That's Tamil they speak and it's also different movie stars that they have there. But the model again is finding the cultural creative community and it's quite broad the way I define that. It's not just actors, it's also musicians, it's poets, it's dancers, it's athletes, it's the people who do speak to the heart of a culture. And so talk to them, energize them and then connect them with media. And what I've found is if I go right to the top of the media, one there's easier access for me because I'm dealing with a boss. That's one door I have to go through. It's usually someone who's highly educated and he's a self-starter, so he's a businessman and he's used to making decisions on his own. So I can get something quite quickly if I can feel that affinity on the subjects and an open heart and stimulate a creative response from the other side. That we can figure out how we can

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use each other's talents to work in this way.

JACKIE JUDD: And what I've heard you describe the last couple of days, the campaign that you want, the model, I guess, that you want. You've talked about it not being a typical public service announcement campaign, but you're going to sell a product. What do you mean by that?

RICHARD GERE: Let me continue the model, because it's not just those two. The cultural artifacts, the icons of a culture, actors, media, who have to work together anyhow, those two parts of any culture have to work very closely together, industry can fit in there very well. Industry is not only a source of money, but it's also intimately connected with everyone's family. Who you work for very much tells what your health plan is or if there is any health or how you think, the hours you work, where you work, the conditions you work under, the kind of philosophy of your work day. It permeates almost everything in your life. If you have industry on your side, you also have a tool to educate and take care of people and they're a captive audience. Put together with that, the people who really know about this stuff in the health world, the NGOs. I don't go to the government first. I go to the NGOs. And they are the again self-starters. The ones who are motivated from the heart to start a clinic where there isn't one. To learn about this issue when no one else knows about it. To treat people that no one else will treat. We serve them. The last of

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this group that I would bring in is the government. The government, I find, usually follows along any moving train that's successful.

JACKIE JUDD: Can we get back now to what I asked before? And that is when I've heard you talk in the past couple of days, you were talking about selling a product. What's the product?

RICHARD GERE: I think we're unsuccessful in doing most PSAs is that they are PSAs. They end up begin something that an audience can start to taste 10 minutes before it comes on and that's when they go get something to eat or go to yell at the dog or whatever they do. I feel you have to make it as exciting as programming usually is on TV, if not more so. And I say sell a product. You put it out like a business plan. Like an ad agency would do it selling a product. You don't stick this PSA at 3 o'clock in the morning on a station where reluctantly a company says we'd like to help you, how can we help you? Show our PSA. Well, fine, we have a slot at 2:30 in the morning and 3, whenever, and most people say, fine, because they're just happy to get it on. That's not good enough for us. We want partners. We're selling this product together because, one, it's meaningful, but the product is something that should be sold. In this case it's HIV/AIDS, everything about it. How do you get this disease? How do you prevent getting this disease? How do you protect yourself and your family? To let you know

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that you will be feeling some discrimination about this disease, how to deal with it. A really holistic approach of what is the emotional, psychological, physical realities of dealing with this disease.

JACKIE JUDD: Let's bring this around to Bangkok for a moment. This is a question I've asked everybody else I've interviewed this week and that is, what at the end of the week do you define as success here at the conference?

RICHARD GERE: Oh, that's on many different levels. I don't think that the headlines that come out of this and the photo ops and all of that is particularly important because there's never any follow up on that anyhow. There's nothing comprehensive and programmatic about that. It's a one off. Once a year everyone kind of gets serious and focuses on this. I think what's more important is that the people who are committed to do this work are reenergized, start to make connections in a way they haven't before. See how existing systems can fit with other ones and become even more productive, more effective. I find that here. I'm not that interested in giving speeches here, but I'm really interested in meeting people who are doing great work and seeing how I can help them do more work or plug into other existing effective situations.

JACKIE JUDD: In a way you anticipated my last question, which is wherever you've been in this conference hall, there's

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a crowd around you. How do you see that attention to celebrity being converted into something real and substantial by the people who do crowd around you?

RICHARD GERE: You told me you've listened to me talk a few times here. I mean I always come down to talking about heart, human connection. That's really where there's transformation and that's why I said, look, the work I'm doing ultimately is feeding the NGOs who are doing this one on one, who are in the clinics, who can give love and attention. Who are there manning hotlines, the few that exist now. But really listen and really take care of people. The few politicians who in their districts are really doing something. Whatever country it is. These are the people who are really doing the work. Now certainly someone like me, I'm very clear about what I can give to this. I can open a door once. It doesn't mean I can do it twice. I can do it once. And if I do it effectively, maybe twice or maybe it will open up a little more. And it's not necessarily for me to go through, but for the whole program, all of us, this community that's trying to do something about this. And it is holistic. None of us does it on its own. Leadership is really important. I do what I can. There's no one here who's not doing, this cameraman is doing what he can. You're doing what you can. The sign guy is doing what he can. Whoever put this light up, you put the light up too? Cameraman and lighting man. We're all doing what we can and I think

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there's no chiefs and Indians in that world. We just do our part.

JACKIE JUDD: Okay. Richard Gere, thank you. I appreciate the time you gave us.

RICHARD GERE: Thank you.

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