

from Americans to eradicate HIV/AIDS and to increase the awareness of the epidemic in Africa. He reminds us that Ashley spent four years at UK, participated in the Honors Program, and studied French literature and cultural anthropology, walking the same paths and sitting in the same classrooms as students in the audience. It is at UK that Ashley deepened her sense of passion, Dean Hoch says, so visible in her life today. "I should like to think, in fact I believe, that UK helped Ms. Judd define her sensibilities and compelled her to commit herself to helping eradicate AIDS."

But Ashley's passion is not confined to film and activism, Dean Hoch points out. Her passion for the University of Kentucky is evident in how much she has given back to the university over the years — as a donor, as a "Y" at the UK basketball games, and as a guest speaker for the 2006 Paul G. Blazer Lecture, he says.

The audience breaks out into wild applause. Surely, it won't be long now.

And then Ashley appears at left stage. She glides across the floor in a flowing, sleeveless black evening gown, her long, exposed arms waving over her head to everyone in the audience.

Our UK royalty has arrived!

Social Justice, Feminism and Spirituality

Kentucky native and UK alumna Ashley Judd held the audience's attention throughout her lecture, "At the Root of My Longing: Social Justice, Feminism and Spirituality."

Judd, an accomplished actress and activist, is the global ambassador for YouthAIDS, a global initiative that generates funding for grassroots programs in 65 countries and raises awareness to help fight the spread of HIV/AIDS among the world's most vulnerable populations. She has traveled throughout Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central America to visit orphanages, slums, brothels, hospices, medical clinics, youth and drop-in centers. Her personal emphasis is empowering girls and women, medically accurate sex education, and putting a stop to human trafficking.

Against a backdrop of riveting faces and tragic cases — and some triumphs — from her travels to other countries, Judd brought the sad plight of so many individuals to the UK campus. "Through the stories of many vulnerable people, in particular, girls and women, I will highlight and stress to you how it is my belief that gender and inequity are at the root of the HIV/AIDS emergency — the worst plague — and nothing short of a complete and total gender revolution will provide us with relief, stability and the lasting peace we all say we crave...I will show you how the lack of educational, legal and economic empowerment for girls and women fuels the unspeakable misery for billions upon this planet," she said.

Over the course of the evening, Judd spoke about patriarchal societies, women's reproductive rights, feminism ("Feminism can be simply put. It is the truth."), Gandhi,

a balanced society, social marketing, peer educators, and connecting with people through grassroots programs. Several times she appeared overcome by the emotional images she showed the audience, as they transported her, no doubt, to her memories of her own personal experiences with the individuals on screen.

Activist, Wife and Movie Star

Pictures of Judd offering compassion to the poor, sick and downtrodden seem so far from the glamorous lifestyle we tend to envision belonging to a film star such as Ashley. She's appeared in over 30 movies and various television episodes since her debut feature film role as 'Ruby Lee Gissing' in Victor Nunez' internationally-acclaimed "Ruby in Paradise." A look at her work just since the year 2000 shows she's appeared with accomplished actors such as Morgan Freeman ("High Crimes"), Harry Connick Jr. ("Bug"), Diane Ladd ("Come Early Morning"), Kevin Kline ("De-Lovely"), Samuel L. Jackson ("Twisted"), Salma Hayek ("Frida"), Ellen Burstyn ("Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood"), Hugh Jackman ("Someone Like You"), and Natalie Portman ("Where the Heart Is").

Between her hectic work schedule and her activist interests, she also found the time to get married. In 2001 she wed open wheel racing driver Dario Franchitti at Skibo Castle near Dornoch, in Sutherland, Scotland. They have eight beloved pets and live in rural Tennessee.

Many would say her commitment to the HIV/AIDS crisis is admirable. She is trying to make a difference in a world that currently has an estimated 40 million people living with the virus; there is no cure, no vaccine, and 90 percent of those who are HIV positive are unaware they have the virus. Yet she will persevere and help to draw attention to the plight of women and children living with sickness and slavery around the world. "There is much hope," she said.

Referencing a quote by President Harry S. Truman, Judd said she has found her 'cri de coeur' (cry from the heart).

"Give Americans the facts and they will do the right thing."

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Quick Fact

The Blazer Lecture Series was started in 1950 by Paul G. Blazer, founder of Ashland Oil Inc., and his wife, Georgia Blazer, the first woman to serve on the UK Board of Trustees.