

Catholic lobbyist helps stars get support for charitable causes

WASHINGTON - You'd think Bono, the lead singer of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame band U2 and a social activist on the side, could open just about any door he wanted.

Not quite. Bono has his own lobbyist. He's Tom Sheridan, and he has been helping celebrities gain access to Congress and Washington's other corridors of power for nearly two decades.

Mr. Sheridan, a Catholic born in the New York City borough of the Bronx who had 19 years of Catholic schooling, never would have become a lobbyist to stars - and nonstars, too - had it not been for social service cuts enacted by the Reagan administration.

According to Mr. Sheridan, he was content to return to New York upon his graduation from The Catholic University of America's School of Social Work in Washington, where he got his master's degree, and help open group homes for adults with developmental disabilities. But the group homes' budgets were dependent on food stamps, Social Security and Medicaid disability payments, all of which were slashed.

"We built these community developments on federal programs," Mr. Sheridan told Catholic News Service in a Sept. 17 telephone interview. "A year and half later (President) Reagan dismantled that whole house of cards. These people got letters saying, 'You are no longer disabled.'"

Mr. Sheridan added, "I was a great social worker but I wasn't able to cure developmental disabilities."

He turned to the National Association of Social Workers, which asked him to assemble a political action program. "Working with local zoning boards," he said, "you understand quick how politics comes into play."

He then did field organizing for Walter Mondale's 1984 Democratic presidential

campaign, and after that became a deputy director at the Child Welfare League of America. His job covered “a huge portfolio of issues, all of which I love: foster care, child abuse, public health, civil rights. ... I could do pretty much whatever I wanted.”

His first major success was getting Congress behind the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act in 1989. It was then he learned the power of celebrity in the person of actress Elizabeth Taylor, who spoke at the first congressional hearing on the measure, which became law in 1990.

The bill was named for a 13-year-old boy who fought AIDS and AIDS-related discrimination, and helped put a public face on the disease. He died in April 1990.

“It was the first time a celebrity had come, advocating legislation for a very controversial issue. She was very moved by the death (from AIDS) of (actor) Rock Hudson, who was very close to her,” Mr. Sheridan told CNS. “It made an enormous difference.”

Mr. Sheridan said he had never before seen any scene like that at the hearing room where Ms. Taylor was to testify.

When he arrived at 7 a.m. for a hearing set to start three or four hours later, “the entire hallway was just literally jammed. Press took up the entire area between the dais and the table where the witness sits,” he recalled. “That was probably my first ‘wow’ moment in terms of celebrity advocacy and a recognition of the power it had.”

He hung out his own shingle in 1995. “We work almost entirely for not-for-profits. We take fairly controversial issues and make them into mainstream discussions,” he said.

Mr. Sheridan added that his faith prepared him for the work he does.

“I find the spirituality and the theology and the philosophy very motivating,” he told CNS. “I think the corporal works of mercy mean something: feed the hungry, shelter the homeless. It does mean something that we’re not here for ourselves, we’re here in the service of other people. That all comes out of my Catholicism.”

As for his most famous celebrity, “Bono doesn’t need anybody to open the door for

him," Mr. Sheridan said, but "what he needs" is to know "when do you open the door? What do you say?"

When Bono is not recording or performing and has extra time, he said, the singer "gives it quite generously and quite passionately to his cause," the One Campaign, an effort to rally Americans to fight the emergency of global AIDS and extreme poverty.

"Start talking to Bono about debt relief, which is about as dry as toast, and he'll talk to you chapter and verse. He'll go deep and he'll go one-on-one in those discussions," Mr. Sheridan said.