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Q & A/Web Exclusive: Susan Saint James Ebersol



Pat Grandjean

*It's been more than 20 years since we've spoken with activist, actress and Litchfield County resident **Susan Saint James Ebersol**, who retired from acting after her 1980s series, "Kate & Allie," ended its run. Married to NBC executive Dick Ebersol, she's also known for her work in "McMillan and Wife" and "It Takes a Thief" as well as her longstanding support of Special Olympics. No stranger to personal adversity (she's struggled with depression and lost her youngest child, Teddy Ebersol, in a 2004 plane crash), she will be honored on Oct. 17 by High Watch Recovery Center in Kent—a recovery community based on 12-step principles—with its first Sister Francis Award (named for the center's benefactor). The award presentation is part of an anniversary celebration that will include a high tea and silent auction, taking place at Avon Old Farms in Avon. Proceeds from the event benefit the construction of a \$2 million medical wing. For more information, call (888)493-5368 or visit highwatchrecovery.com.*

This is an anniversary, of sorts. We did a *Connecticut Magazine* cover story on you 21 years ago this month.

I know, with a photo of me sitting in my jeans on my stone wall.

What do you remember about that piece, if anything?

Had I stopped working already? It was before I had Teddy, who was born in June 1990. So I hadn't gotten pregnant with him yet, and I was just finishing the last year of "Kate & Allie," though I didn't know it. But I don't remember the interview—it's funny because I just saw that issue. I'm sort of sorting through all my stuff right now, as much as I can take. It's not much fun, not the romp you think it would be: "Oh, look at this photo of me." Because there was so much anguish and stuff going on all the time. You remember what you weighed, and why you hated that outfit.

But I remember the interview being very positive, and a lot of fun. What do you remember about it?

I remember thinking you were very kind to give us so much access to your home, because it's not something everybody we feature does. I remember thinking that was quite generous and somewhat uncommon.

True. Although I think I asked that all the photos be shot from the back yard. In terms

of having people here, I've done a ton of fund raisers for political things; I did one for Bob Ballard when I was a trustee at the Mystic Aquarium. So I've never been too shy about that. I did put gates in eventually, because people would just walk in. When you're on TV, people think of you as their best friends. It's not like being a movie star; in that case people see you as a little more "scary." People would walk in the back door and yell, "Sue!" I'd be like, "Huh? What?"

I'm such a citizen; I was on the Parks & Rec commission here, raised my kids here, taught CCD one year at the local church. Once I retired, I became more that way. My last three boys were all born in the same hospital Dick was born in. I was in the garden club. We own the radio station in town; I did an "afternoon drive" show for awhile.

I did get a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame after I retired. Now, *that* was fun. It was a kind of tribute to the years I did spend there. When too much time passes from your last job, you sort of become a footnote. And your fans are so aged, they're not carrying the banners for you so much. But the ceremony was really sweet, I actually loved it. And three of my boys live out there, so they go by and see it all the time.

Tell me about the award you're receiving this month, the *Sister Francis Award from High Watch*.

I became friends with Janina [Kean, President and CEO of High Watch Recovery Center]. . . actually, I'm trying to remember how we became friends. Up until about 12 years ago, I was probably best known in Connecticut for my work with Special Olympics. Probably still to this day; I mean, when we did the World Games in 1995 in New Haven, I got five honorary doctorate degrees in the state. That was because I was all over the place promoting the organization . . . actually, I was from the time we moved here, in 1981, when I was pregnant with my son Charlie. I moved here and didn't really

know anyone, and Dick was producing "Saturday Night Live," so he didn't come home on the weekends. So I was up here all alone, although happily, and I called Mrs. Shriver and said, "What can I do up here?" I'd been huge with Special Olympics in California. She said, "well, my son Timmy is going to run the board, and Peter Wheeler"—who is a great, great friend of mine—"is going to be the executive director, so sign up."

I jumped in, and I was all over the state within 20 minutes of having Charlie; I was massively involved. We had 15 to 20 athletes at every taping of "Kate & Allie," and we did two tapings a week. We did 120 shows, so that was 240 batches of kids—I think everybody in the Special Olympics program at that time got a chance to come down in a bus and see the show tape. I became such a strong and active advocate in Connecticut—you know, my mom was born in Cromwell, my dad in Waterbury, and they went to high school in Middletown, so they were citizens, too.

After I retired, I just thought, "This'll be great, I won't go to work any more." I had five kids, I took a cake-decorating class, entered the Goshen Fair with my knitting and won a prize. I did everything I thought I was *dying* to do when I stopped working. And all of a sudden I was slammed with the fact that I no longer got a paycheck, for the first time since I was 15 or 16. I didn't have anyone telling me, "Good job"—kids don't usually say, "Mom, I loved that advice you gave me today. Wow, you're a great mom." Usually, when they're 50 and you're dying, they come up with that one. So, I got depressed. And I had never, *ever* gone through that before. I mean, I ran the world from the time I was 2 years old.

My little son, Teddy—who's now gone—had a learning disability. It was pretty mild, but it was enough to make him angry. We got that taken care of, and he was fine, but his teachers suggested he go into therapy because he was cranky. And I went, too. The

doctor said, "Have you been through therapy at lot?" I mean, here I was: actress, TV star, married. I said, "Oh, heck no." And he would say to me, "Well, how much wine do you drink?" I told him, "I drink a glass of red wine a night." It was more like a bowl. He said, "Well, why don't you cut that out, because it could be that you're depressed." I was like, "Depressed? Me?" I mean, I was so out of touch with anything that might have been going on with me. I didn't get it. The doctor kept pestering me and I kept thinking, "Why is he bugging me? So I have a shooter once in a while when I have my Mexican food!"

I told a friend what I was going through and they said, "Y'know, you might want to go to a 12-step meeting." I walked into a meeting and I never looked back. I haven't had a drink in 11 years. It was funny, because then I read in a magazine that Jamie Lee Curtis had done that, so I wrote her—she was an old friend of mine—and she wrote back, "Yeah, this is the greatest." She was like me: No big scene, nobody said, "You're a drunk." It was just a malaise that wouldn't go away, and it was being fueled by a steady stream of drinking to forget or drinking to be "happy." Of course, it doesn't work that way for addicts.



So I went to this meeting and Janina saw me there. She goes to meetings, studies meetings, knows about them. She asked me to speak at a picnic—you have to have a year's sobriety to speak anywhere really important, and I did, and we became fast friends ever since. She's a spectacular woman. And she runs a spectacular program, because there's a variety of intervention strategies and a full medical component there. They wanted support for that. And I said I'd be glad to do it and to speak about whatever, you know?

The idea that you had struggled with drinking is totally surprising.

Right. And I never became dysfunctional, but I was just miserable. I was the kind of person who—as Dick likes to say—would bend over backwards for strangers and then be cranky with my family. I'd never offend anyone in public, just save it for when I got home. And that for kids is like, "Eauggh." So all of that added up. So I found the answer and I always tell people, it's the best therapy in the world. You meet the greatest people, that have overcome so much, and maybe were alienated from their families and never got them back. So often, your family doesn't ever believe you again. They don't come around.

I saw Ann Richards speak once; she was the governor of Texas. She said, "I'm Ann Richards and I am an alcoholic. I come from a dysfunctional family—I've yet to meet a functional one!" I think more people should speak out about it. I've met women who say "Yeah, I used to carry around a bottle of vodka in my baby carriage," and no one had a clue. They don't know that there's all this sort of quiet desperation going on.

Do you ever feel any desire to work again?

Sometimes. But my mom is still alive and I take care of her; she's 95. I have a collection of junk that goes from floor to ceiling in about 18 rooms of a very, very big house. Every little tiny scrap of paper I'm devoted to; so it's almost a disease. I'm determined to go through it all and put it into some order or get rid of it. I'm going to do a big fashion show—I have all the clothes I ever wore in my life, and I'm going to do a big fashion show *of* my life as a fund raiser for Connecticut Special Olympics. I'll show video of me in the clothes from whatever shows I wore them in—I have videos of every show I ever did. So I'll have some purpose for saving some of this crap. It'll probably happen in the early spring of next year. I'll do a runway of tee-shirts that are

hysterical: "Save the this," "Save the that." One for every rock band. Just a cavalcade of tee-shirts. After that, I'm gonna throw them away.

Maybe you could auction some of them. Are they in good shape?

They're all in perfect shape; are you kidding? I have all three of my wedding dresses; one of them's a maternity dress. I have clothes from "McMillan and Wife," "The Name of the Game," *all* of them.

Do you watch the old shows, ever?

Not too much. There's something about having been there that, y'know . . . the "Kate & Allie"'s are the hardest to watch because the hairdo's and the styles—I just haven't come to terms with the '80s yet. I'm just like, "What was I thinking with that mullet and those shoulders?" I mean, it's just *awful*. The "McMillans" are the most fun to watch, because they're so wonderful and it was so much fun to do. And they're from so long ago, it's almost like watching period movies.

Someone has put the pilot episode from "It Takes a Thief" on YouTube.

Yes, I love those. And you know, YouTube has a lot of scenes from that series. I've been able to capture a ton of them; it's so much fun. Most of my stuff was done at Universal Studios, and the guy that runs Universal was my agent, Ron Meyer. So he's been able to find some stuff for me in their vaults, which is pretty fun. One show we did was so funny, because they said, "Okay, it's Eastern European." And they'd have fake countries, like Litzphair. We'd go, "What's the country again?" and it would be some fake name. And then, every actor had a different accent. You'd be going, "*Huh?*" It was hilarious.

Bob Wagner was so adorable. I mean, I worked with Rock Hudson, George Hamilton and Robert Wagner. These were just icons of my childhood. They had such elegance and style, and were always on

time, always knew their lines, would never come to work drunk. Think of it.

Were you a good professional?

Oh, God, yes. I went to a Catholic boarding school. That's why Jane [Curtin] and I worked so well together; she went to Catholic girls' school. We would go in on taping day—we did a dress rehearsal from 4 to 5:30 p.m., then we'd have notes, then we'd shoot from 6 to 8. At the same time, "The Cosby Show" would go to 2 a.m. with reshoots. First of all, we had Bill Persky, who was the most spectacular TV director of his day. He did "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Your Show of Shows." He'd say, "That's it; we're going home" and we'd be home by 9 p.m. One time we had a dog and were working till 9:45; after that, Jane turned around and said, "No more dogs. They hold us up; we don't need it."

Do you watch much TV today?

I do watch some. I used to watch a lot of television; with my kids I would use it to knit. I watch sports with Dick; I'm a huge sports fan. Even when Dick's not here I'll watch a whole day of football. Right now, I like "The Closer." I think she's spectacular. I love the show "Memphis Beat," I absolutely love the music and Jason Lee, who's adorable. I'm also an "NCIS" watcher; that's my age group, I guess. And I watch "Burn Notice," I'm addicted to that. I'm very USA Network; that's kind of my scene.

My kids watch a much younger bunch of stuff. They range from 23 to 33 years old now. They're extremely pop-culture oriented. One son's in music and film, the other two are in television and film. They live out in LA and are up on it all. They know who's making the shows, who's directing them—I'm not up on that stuff any more.

You also have a daughter, right?

I do. I have a beautiful daughter, Sunshine,

and a granddaughter. They live in Forest Hills, and her husband works with my husband at NBC. Sunshine is divine—she's taken some time off from working to raise her daughter and have another child. She started late, and it's a little trickier to get pregnant when you're older. She and her husband are terrific—I'm glad they live on the East Coast because it's my only grandchild so far. The boys are so much slower. They're a pain. They all have terrific girlfriends and they're just dragging their feet. I feel like saying to the girlfriends, "Move on—these guys aren't ever going to do anything; they're too lazy."

My granddaughter and I are really devoted to each other, we're great buddies. She calls me "Gigi." She's two. She's not quite a telephone talker yet.

You mentioned what a sports fanatic you are. I had heard you did some commentary for Wrestlemania.

I did. I'm waiting to get into the Hall of Fame: I did Wrestlemania III, or II, now they're on like XXX!

So what do you think of Linda McMahon's run for the Senate?

You know, good for Linda. I'm a Democrat. I *love* her, adore her. She's one of our very good friends, and both Vince and Linda are upstanding, tremendous people. My kids grew up with them. She's just too Republican, what can I say? This is tricky. I'm not one of those people who's divisive, but I am just a lifetime Democrat, a Yellow Dog Democrat. It's a fine line, because I'm probably fiscally sort of conservative. But I really think she and I differ on what we should spend the money on. But I'm just a citizen, a voter. I hesitate to criticize too much because I'm not willing to go out there and *do* it. So good for her: She's devoted to this race, and you can't meet her and not love her. She's just terrific and smart.

My mother, who is 95, is worse than I am. She's more liberal than my kids, who were

all part of the Obama movement. My mom knew all about Obama before I even knew who he was. My parents were way liberal; I'm so proud of the fact that they fell on the right side of everything in our history. They knew all about McCarthy from Day One, about Nixon from Day One because they lived in California even before World War II. My dad worked in defense; he was a toolmaker. We were raised in LA till I was 12. They were on the right side of gay marriage, on the right side of all the things I think were slam-dunk deals. Vietnam? I was so against the war but not against the soldiers—my brother was a Marine. I wanted to bring those boys out of there. And not from the start, but as it became so obvious it was wrong. And it was hard sometimes to be on the right side.

Now, the focus is to get back the middle class, to give more people the chance to own a home. And they say that's where Fannie and Freddie got into trouble, but they had the right intentions. The money went away because of what happened on Wall Street. I believe that. I don't believe it was Fannie and Freddie; I believe it was right to give people the chance to own a home.

It feels like we're demonizing the wrong people.

Exactly. But I said to Valerie Jarrett—she came to the Olympics in Vancouver—I keep expecting Mr. Obama to come out and go, "Hey, Michelle and I say thanks, we loved it, but you know what? We're leaving." And Valerie said, "Don't feel sorry for him. He absolutely loves that job. He loves being President of the United States, and he's up to it. He keeps that vision, and it's not easy because they'll make your vision look like muck if you don't watch it." I hate all the divisiveness, but if you talk to a historian they'll tell you it was just as bad with Jefferson and Adams. This is nothing new.

I understand that when you were younger, you attended Black Panther meetings.

I did. They were doing community breakfasts for the poor in Watts at the time. That was at a time when black leadership was saying, "Why do we have to be the loser, drug-dealing, bad image people?" Let's build our image and take care of our own." It would be like us not giving aid to Pakistan, just letting the Taliban do it. Who are the people gonna love? They're certainly not going to love the people who are shooting their relatives in Afghanistan and them not doing a thing about the flooding. It was the same thing in Watts. I went to a meeting where Angela Davis spoke. She was an amazing, powerful, strong woman. It began to turn, and made me nervous—I and others with me weren't as welcome. And then they just slaughtered these kids, shot them in the heads. They just got rid of them—it was horrible. So that just polarized everybody again.

I was working with Marlo Thomas and Donna Reed at the time on "Another Mother for Peace." We were these working actresses playing these all-American, good-looking women, and we were against the Vietnam War because of the boys, and the lies we were being told. When Donna Reed got involved, that movement became much more mainstream. I never wound up in the headlines, but I was in the trenches of that war a lot. I worked for the USO, visited the wounded in hospitals. I think the people who should be most ashamed were the people in the military who didn't welcome these boys back from the war. They couldn't get into veterans' bars, they couldn't drink there, nobody treated them well. They didn't give them any G.I. Bill or put them through college. Those were the people who sent them over there, and didn't welcome them home.

To finish up, do you have any other plans in the pipeline?

Not really. As I mentioned, I'm taking care of my mother, which is a privilege and an honor; she's absolutely got all of her faculties and is spectacular fun. But she's not that mobile anymore. I'm sort of being groomed as the future matriarch of the family. I travel a ton with Dick. One of my siblings is very sick with cancer; so I'm going to be a part of that.

I think I should write a book. I should produce a TV show that I have an idea for. I should produce a movie from this book that I love. And then I think, "No, I should be doing what I am doing right now." When I was a kid my dad used to say, "if you can conceive it, you can do it." And now my philosophy is, "Just because you can conceive it doesn't mean you have to do it." If I did everything I had a thought about, I wouldn't have a friend. I'd just be going all the time.