



Head of State

Blair Underwood

is one busy man—especially on TV, where he plays the president, a leadership role that suits him just fine.

Heads turn as actor Blair Underwood arrives

at his favorite Los Angeles brunch spot, Aroma Café in Studio City, Calif., to meet with *Washington Flyer*. While none of the patrons abruptly stand up or start humming “Hail to the Chief” as he makes his way to a table outside, even the busy baristas stop to soak in the near-presidential swagger of Underwood’s gait.

The busy Hollywood veteran, 46, who has regularly graced TV and movie screens for more than a quarter of a century in such staples as “L.A. Law,” “Sex and the City” and “In Treatment,” exudes a confidence, style and charisma reminiscent of the true leader of the free world. But make no mistake: Underwood’s President Elias Martinez on NBC’s new conspiracy drama “The Event” is not modeled after President Barack Obama. In fact, our fictitious White House head, now noshing on an asparagus and goat cheese omelet, won’t even confirm whether Martinez is a Democrat or a Republican.

“Sorry, I can’t say,” insists a smiling Underwood with a frustrating degree of unyielding charm. “What I *can* tell you is that Martinez has assembled the first bipartisan cabinet, taking on a vice president from the opposing party. We just aren’t revealing”—“we” meaning his executive producers—who, exactly, belongs to which camp. We want to keep the audience guessing. We don’t want to alienate anyone!”

“Alienate” is a funny choice of word, given the show’s “X-Files”-like focus. Because

there’s so much more Underwood is hiding, starting with what, exactly, “the event” is.

Paranoid theories abound, of course: Aliens have arrived to attack the Earth, à la “Independence Day” or “War of the Worlds.” Or the reverse: The all-knowing “detainees,” a group of humanlike extraterrestrials held captive by the U.S. government in Alaska since World War II, see the inevitable future—ice caps melting, atomic bombs set off by terrorists—and are here to thwart mankind’s dense, Neanderthal-like ways before we doom ourselves to go the way of the dinosaurs.

Or maybe the event is something else altogether. Either way, Underwood won’t be persuaded to share.

He’s happy enough to chat up his new series—why he was so excited after reading the script for the pilot; how incredibly supportive NBC is toward the project; his enthusiasm for his co-stars, “ER” alum Laura Innes and Hollywood’s heir apparent Jason Ritter. And he’s “thrilled beyond belief” with the show’s reception by hungry fans looking for their next “Lost” or “24” fix, now that

those monster-hit serial dramas have run their nail-biting courses.

But the actor and activist wants Washingtonians—and all Americans—to understand his No. 1 talking point today, the message he hopes will find its way into print: the importance of shining a light on the continuing AIDS epidemic and what we all can do to help end it.

“People think: Hey, it’s 2010. Why are we still talking about AIDS?” says Underwood with the fiery delivery of a political pro. “But when I learned the No. 1 cause of death for African-American women aged 21 to 34 is complications from HIV, I was shocked ... and I knew I had to do something about it.”

Which is why Underwood joined forces with AIDS Healthcare Foundation, the country’s largest nonprofit HIV/AIDS health-care provider. The actor lends his model-handsome face to L.A. billboards that urge locals to “Man Up” and get tested; he’s also co-hosted an AIDS fundraiser in September with such luminaries as Wanda Sykes at the renowned Greek Theatre in L.A. But his most quantifiable effort—results that can be measured in human lives extended, improved or saved—is the AHF Blair Underwood Healthcare Center, located on the 2100 block of K Street, NW, right here in Washington, D.C.

The Cause

Call him an accidental AIDS activist. Underwood initially devoted his energy to the group Artists for a New South Africa, which he joined 21 years ago at the urging of his longtime friend, actress Alfre Woodard, to “shine a light on apartheid and Nelson Mandela, who was still in prison at that time.” A few years later, the actor’s—and the organization’s—focus shifted when Mandela was freed in 1990 and elected president of the country in 1994.

“Everything transitioned then from apartheid to AIDS and HIV,” Underwood says, referring to the nation’s alarming infection rate, which, according to the 2008 South African National HIV Survey, approaches a stunning 11 percent of all South Africans over age 2. “Look, I’m a father. To see so many children in South Africa affected, so many left without parents ... I knew I had to do something. Now, it’s about educating people, giving them the medical supplies they need.”

This crash course in the devastation of AIDS led Underwood to AHF. Underwood sees himself as the deliverer of an oft-ignored message: “Too many heterosexual men in the black community [here in the

JORDIN ALTHAUS/NBC

United States] still think this disease doesn't affect them. They still think it's a gay disease; it's not their problem. But with HIV rates on the rise again, it's time they start to hear this is everyone's problem. We all have to do our part."

Michael Weinstein, founder of the AHF, praises Underwood's unflinching approach: "Many celebrities of Blair's caliber have been openly nervous about being identified with the disease. It takes guts to attach your name and face to it. People might wrongly assume he's infected because he's a spokesman. It's a testament to who he is. It's no coincidence he can play the president of the United States on television, because he has the gravitas. We're very proud of him. What he's doing is a great example for others."

AHF's D.C. clinic that bears Underwood's name has four examination beds and a single, dedicated doctor, Roxanne Cox-Iyama, who is also the center's medical director. The clinic is currently treating about 150 outpatients, but can treat 500 or more. It also accepts all types of insurance—or none at all if a patient is uninsured. The goal is to encourage testing and to treat HIV-positive patients early, regularly and with the latest medical therapies.

Underwood is no stranger to Washington. In fact, he spent some of his formative years living in Alexandria, Va. A self-coined "army brat," the actor reminisces about his father taking him "to the Pentagon to go swimming. There's an underground pool there. It's like a whole little city underground. My dad taught me how to swim at that pool."

His family bounced around military bases in Germany, Michigan, Georgia and Colorado before his parents finally settled in Petersburg, two hours south of D.C. near Richmond, Va., where they remain today.

Now based in L.A. with a family of his own—he and his wife, Desiree, have three kids: Paris, 13, Brielle, 11, and Blake, 9—Underwood remains an enthusiastic traveler. "I love to travel," he almost gushes. "And when you grow up like I did, moving around a lot, you bond really closely with your family, because in every new place you rely so much on each other. I bring that to my family now. We make a point to go somewhere international every summer."

He's not kidding. In the past few years, the Underwoods have explored China and Rome and even taken a Kenyan safari. "We didn't see any lions for almost two weeks," he says of Kenya, "but then, on the last day

before we were due to leave, we were driving around in an open jeep, and our guide spotted a lioness in the grass. He pointed out a male lion lying in wait a few feet behind her. The guide proceeded to tell us *exactly* what was about to happen. And he was right! My youngest was around 5 at the time. He asked me what was going on, and I said: 'Um, they're wrestling! They're wrestling!' Which seemed like a good answer."

His children may adore their jet-set adventures, but they love less exotic, more immediate climes, too. This past summer they road-tripped to the Grand Canyon, and, of course, there's always the history and culture found in Washington, which they last visited during the recent inaugural.

"We did the Smithsonian museums, the White House. My kids asked so many questions [about the inauguration]: Why is this historical? I had to answer them in a way that was age-appropriate. But it was beautiful to watch it through their eyes."

His own eyes shine brightly at the memory. Gone now is the swagger, replaced with a fatherly pride.

Which, come to think of it, only makes Underwood seem all the more presidential. ☺

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