



THE SPIN DOCTOR

Sharon Lewis: New counterSpin Host, Writer, Fair Debater

"Last year, I was living in Los Angeles and I decided to quit auditioning for acting roles. I got spoiled working in Canada. I never had to do sitcoms; I never had to do music videos. But in L.A., they didn't know what to do with me. They don't have a category for South Asian actors. They tried to make me Latino, but I don't speak Spanish. Or I was Afro-American, but I didn't want to do sitcoms. So if I wanted to do a project of any relevance, I had to come back to Canada or act in plays. And who goes to L.A. to do theatre?"

"Once I stopped acting, I had to get a job. So I taught an independent-living program in Los Angeles, teaching foster youth how to live: how to write a cheque, how to find housing, that sort of thing. I used role-playing to encourage them to come up with their own answers. For example, we had a huge debate about selling drugs. For me to walk in and simply say, 'Don't sell drugs,' wouldn't have made sense to them, because I have a job. So instead, I asked them, 'If you make \$500 selling drugs, what could it cost you in terms of jail time? What are the other risks?' They'd say, 'Well, I could die; my family could die; I could get shot.' Then their argument would be, 'It's better than working at McDonald's.' And I'd say, 'Well, yes, if your world is either 'I deal drugs' or 'I work at McDonald's.' But what if the choice is between becoming a lawyer and dealing drugs? Or becoming a teacher and dealing drugs?' I wanted to help them explore the alternatives. But the scary part was that if you engage in fair debate, you have to be willing to lose just like on *counterSpin*."

"My mom told me about the *counterSpin* job. I called *counterSpin*'s producer and sent him some rants I wrote, one about Rob Anders's comments about Nelson Mandela being a terrorist and the other about the delisting of sex-change operations by the Harris Government in Ontario. Then the CBC flew me into Toronto to host a live show about reforms to the Divorce Act. They offered me the job after that. I think the 'counter' in *counterSpin* is to counter the rhetoric. Which is what I was trying to do with the kids and the drug debate. I, of course, already think drugs are bad. But I had to be willing to be open to having my mind changed." ■

Sharon Lewis takes over as the host of CBC Newsworld's counterSpin on September 17, replacing the current host, Avi Lewis. They are not related. She has written two plays, co-edited an anthology that explores women's sexuality, and played the lead role in Clement Virgo's film Rude. She is "almost finished" her first novel. For more on the many careers of Sharon Lewis, visit our Web site at www.saturdaynight.ca.

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