



# Martin Sheen, Actor

## Lights, Camera, Activism

### Lesson Introduction

**Interview Log:** Interviewed on June 7, 2023 by David Bender

- Access *The Thread* episode of Martin Sheen on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

### Learning Objectives

#### Social Studies Focus

- Explore Martin Sheen's story as an entry point to discuss living a life as an activist
- Connect one life story to a seminal historical event in American History - the Civil Rights Movement and the March on Selma

#### English Language Arts Focus

- Use Martin Sheen's life story to explore identity
- Inspire students to tell their own coming-of-age stories
- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one actor
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- To use Martin Sheen's episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

### Episode Overview

Martin Sheen discusses the origin of his stage name and the influence of his immigrant parents on his political views and spiritual beliefs. He delves into his activism, arrests, and community service. Sheen reflects on his long acting career, including the impact of his role in *The West Wing*, which inspired young people to pursue careers in public service.



### Biography

Actor Martin Sheen was born Ramón Estévez on August 3, 1940 in Dayton, Ohio to Mary Ann and Francisco Estévez; he was the seventh of 10 children. His mother died when he was 11. After leaving home to pursue acting in his early 20s, he adopted the anglicized stage name Martin Sheen, in hopes that it would get him seen for more auditions. In 1959, Sheen made his professional stage acting debut in *The Connection* for the Living Theater. Soon after, he began working in television. He found Broadway success and a Tony nomination with Frank D. Gilroy's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *The Subject Was Roses*. Sheen married Janet Templeton in 1961 and they have four children: Ramón Estevez, Renée Estevez, Emilio Estevez, and Charlie Sheen (born Carlos Estevez). After his 1970 breakout role in *Catch-22*, his real breakthrough came in 1973 as a serial killer who goes on the run with a teenage girl in Terrence Malick's *Badlands*. He became a household name after starring in Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 epic *Apocalypse Now*. From 1999 to 2006, Sheen starred as President Josiah "Jed" Bartlet in the political drama series *The West Wing*, earning him six Emmy nominations. From 2015 until 2022, Sheen portrayed Robert Hanson in *Grace and Frankie*, starring alongside Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Sam Waterston. He is a multiple Emmy and Golden Globe winner. Sheen is a longtime activist for social justice and human rights fighting for farmworker's rights, for climate justice, and for many political campaigns.



## Teaching Tip: **First Take**

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

### Suggested Steps

- ▣ **Read** the opening of Martin Sheen's episode aloud to students:

"My real name is Ramón Estévez. Martin Sheen is a stage name that I never changed. Officially. I'm still Ramón. It's on my driver's license, passport, and all my official papers. Sheen is made and if this gig doesn't work out, I'll go back to Ramón, you know?"



- ▣ **Ask and Discuss:** What do we learn about Martin Sheen from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?
- ▣ **Next,** do a one-minute quick write reflecting on what he shared or have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings about why he changed his name?
- ▣ **Last,** as a class discuss the reasons they think the filmmakers choose this opening for the episode?



**Photos:** The celebrated American actor Martin Sheen, aged 7 at school, 1947. (Alamy) top; Emilio Estevez and Martin Sheen at UK Premiere for their new film "The Way" at the BFI in London. Feb 21, 2011. (Alamy) lower



## Teaching Tip:

# THE THREAD Up Close

After watching the interview, have students debrief his life story with these suggested questions:

- ▣ Why do you think Martin Sheen’s episode is titled “Lights, Camera, Activism”?
- ▣ What did you learn from his interview about his relationship between acting and activism?
- ▣ In what ways did you connect with his life story?

After discussing, have students return to **The Thread** episode and engage them in a close read and analysis of his interview using the video and transcript. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning **The Thread** with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of **A Thread** connection: In exploring what it means to live a life as an activist, this passage from Martin Sheen offers a unique insight:

“You know that you’ve got to choose sides. You cannot not choose sides and be honest with yourself. Never mind what anyone else thinks about you. It’s how you think about yourself. So, yeah, I was an activist without calling myself an activist. I was living in times that I was very aware of and I had an opinion about them and I showed it with the way I lived and the way I act. Or at least I tried to, but didn’t always succeed.”

## Connections

- ▣ What words would you use to describe Martin Sheen?
- ▣ What did you learn about navigating identities from this episode?
- ▣ How would you define Martin Sheen’s point of view about activism and its relationship to his faith?
- ▣ What new insights did you gain about (yourself, your community, your world) from his story?







## Activity: Lights, Camera, Activism

Post this last segment of Martin Sheen's episode on your shared classroom space:

I'm a practicing Catholic. I'll get it right, I hope, someday. But I love the faith. I have a lot of problems with the Church. It's male dominated, it's made a horrible bunch of mistakes over the centuries, but the faith in itself is very, very nourishing and very important. It's where I go to kind of claim the chamber in my heart, that's the best way I know to describe it. I know myself in this faith. I believe in the basic tenets of Catholicism and they make absolute perfect sense to me. As I say, if what you believe is not costly, then you're left to question its value, and that's what I face every day of my life. So I can't separate that from my family life, my political life, my public life, my artistic life in the movies or whatever I do artistically. It's when I found a way to unite the will of the spirit to the work of the flesh then I went everywhere as the same guy and experienced the sense of joy that I never had before. I reconverted to Catholicism in '81, so the last half of my life has been by far the most difficult because I was so involved in so many issues. But it's equally the happiest because I know myself in that sphere, and I don't anticipate changing anyone's life but mine.

- ▣ Have students choose one sentence from this passage they believe best illustrates their definition of an activist
- ▣ In pairs, have each student share their sentence and discuss their reasoning
- ▣ If time permits, discuss as a large class



### Additional Resources

- ▣ See Martin Sheen biography at the [Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights organization](#)
- ▣ [Background on Selma March](#), National Archives
- ▣ Background on [Broadway Answers Selma](#)
- [Image](#)

