

Cowles, Charlotte. "My Friend Elizabeth Taylor." *Harper's Bazaar*. (February 18, 2016).

BAZAAR

MY FRIEND ELIZABETH TAYLOR

Ahead of his new book, "My Elizabeth," photographer Firooz Zahedi talks about Elizabeth Taylor and their 35-year friendship.



This particular photo of Elizabeth and Sugar, her dog, was taken in 1993. We all loved Sugar and she would come everywhere with Elizabeth. Once, when we were going to Cannes, we had to hold up the whole plane so Sugar could go and pee on the tarmac—but everyone adored her because she was such a calm little dog. When Sugar passed away, Elizabeth was so broken-hearted that they got her another dog that looked just like Sugar. But its behavior was totally different, so then they got her yet another one that looked like Sugar, too. The second one was a little better, but still not Sugar. There are a lot of photos with Elizabeth and Sugar in the book because you couldn't tear the dog away from her. I shot her for the cover of *French Vogue*, and she had Sugar in her arms. But Sugar's quite stylish, I think. A little more minimal in her attire.

The first time I met Elizabeth was at the Iranian Embassy in Washington, DC during the summer of 1976. She was invited by my cousin, who was the Iranian ambassador with the previous government, and he asked me to come help supervise a brunch he was holding for her. Then, at the last minute, he had to go to New York for official business, so he asked me to look after her and show her around the city. I was in my late 20s and shy, thinking, "What am I doing, this tête-à-tête with this movie star?" But she asked me all about myself, so I opened up to her about how I wanted to be an artist, even though my family wanted me to get a real job.

She started encouraging me to do what I wanted to do, and she made me feel important and equal. I didn't just feel like I was escorting her around; I felt like I was with a friend. And all of this happened in the space of one day. That evening we had dinner, just her and I, and we just bonded within 24 hours.

That night she also showed me all her jewelry, but unfortunately, I didn't really know much about it at that point. I was like, "Who's Bulgari?" She gave me the whole history of who gave her this piece and who gave her that one, and it was like, "Richard this" and "Francis that." Later I realized she was talking about Frank Sinatra. I was fascinated that this famous woman, a huge celebrity, was telling me all about her life without me asking her any questions. I felt that since she had confided in me, I was going to respect her confidence and not share anything she said with anyone else.

I came from a very conservative Iranian family of politicians and military people, and a guy didn't pursue the arts back then. I used to win awards at school for my drawings and paintings, but I was a closeted artist. Elizabeth brought me out and said, "It's okay. You're good. You should do it." And it really helped to have someone who had an eye, who knew about things, who was respected and knew photography.

My cousin wanted Elizabeth to go to Iran as a special guest on a goodwill tour of the country that same year, and she said, "Well, if you send Firooz along, I'll go." So we went to Iran together. I had just started being a photographer, and I was working with Andy Warhol for his new magazine, Interview. I had one little 35-millimeter camera, and I took snapshots as we walked around the sites. I have some amazing images—one of her wearing a burka outside a mosque, and another of her dressed in a tribal costume and lying on a sofa in the hotel. I never had any intention of publishing them—it was like two friends taking photos as tourists. But she told Andy Warhol about them, and he turned the whole thing into a cover story for Interview. Up until that point, I wasn't 100 percent sure I wanted to be a photographer, but then I said, "You know what? Getting things published, especially photographs of Elizabeth Taylor... I think I'm going to pursue this as a career."

In 1978, she brought me out to Los Angeles because she was doing a movie, and she introduced me to everyone as her photographer, which was quite a big label. She didn't make me feel awkward about it; I just thought, "Well, I must be good if she's calling me that."

We had 35 years of friendship, and a few years before she died, I asked if we could do a book of photographs that we'd taken. I didn't want to do anything without permission, and she said sure. I told her it wasn't for the money, and I would contribute the money to the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation, which she had set up. She was very happy about that, and she wrote a little foreword for the book. I'm very excited that it's coming out now.

Elizabeth was the first main celebrity to come out and speak up about AIDS. This was in the mid-80s, when AIDS was a huge issue that everyone was shunning. If people heard someone had AIDS or was HIV-positive, they'd run to the other side of the street, but Elizabeth would go up and hug them. She stood behind a cause that was not accepted by the average person. Even the government wasn't doing anything about it. So for her to do that took a lot of courage.

I would go with her to amfAR events in Amsterdam, Venice, Cannes, all over the place. She wasn't always in good health, but she'd make these long trips to go stand up and talk in front of people about the importance of dealing with AIDS. At that point in her life, she was making millions from her perfume business, and she could've been lounging on yachts every day, but she wanted to dedicate her life to a bigger cause. This photo of her, on the yacht in Cannes, is a rare moment of rest for her, actually.

As a photographer, my job has been to make people look very stylish, but Elizabeth didn't have

what you and I and a lot of people would consider great taste in clothes or hairstyles. She didn't care if she was overweight and wore the wrong outfit, or if she was wearing shoulder pads when she shouldn't be. She just said, "You know what? This is me. I like to dress this way. I like to tease my hair up. Take me for what I am." I remember I was going to the Vanity Fair Oscar party one year, and I watched the awards on TV with her beforehand. I said, "Elizabeth, put something on and come with me. You'll have fun." Every year they would invite her and she wouldn't go. And she said, "Nah. I don't want to do that." She just wasn't into it. She was like, "I'm in my slippers, in my PJ's. I don't want to get dressed up and go out." She was never going to be remembered as a style icon like Audrey Hepburn or a Grace Kelly or Jackie Kennedy. But at the end of the day, I think it was more important to her to be herself and do something worthwhile, rather than being remembered as someone who was super stylish.

Elizabeth was raised in Hollywood, so she was always dressed by costume designers. In the 60s, when she filmed "Cleopatra" and glammed it up and married Richard Burton and ran around Europe, her fashion sense changed a little, but a lot of things didn't work well on her. She was short and bosomy, and she couldn't carry that classic look, so she always found something a little exaggerated. We were shooting at her house one time, and I went in to check on her, and her hair stylist was just standing there watching Elizabeth tease her hair up high. I pulled him aside and said, "You are a famous hair stylist. Why are you letting her do this?" And he said, "Darling, she can do whatever she wants. That's Elizabeth." When I shot her for the cover of Vanity Fair in the 1990s, the magazine didn't want her hair teased up, so I bought her a piece of jewelry from Tiffany or Cartier, I can't remember, to bribe her and beg her to take her hair level down. She brought it down a little bit—not quite the amount I wanted, but still, because I was begging her to do it, she did it.

Down the road, every major designer from Valentino to Versace would make things for her. I remember Gianfranco Ferré did an outfit for her for the Millennium Dinner at the White House, just before Clinton left, and she asked me to go with her. Her outfit was really complicated, made of burgundy velvet. She had to go to the restroom, and I waited outside, and soon I could hear her screaming and cursing like a sailor. She said, "Firooz, come here!" One of those elegantly-dressed men in uniform at the White House was standing there, looking at me like his eyes were about to pop out. I said, "Excuse me, sir," and I went in to help her. She'd gotten the zipper caught while trying to get back into her outfit, so I had to tear the whole thing and we covered it up. It was just one of the most amusing moments of going out with her.

I wrote little stories in the book that show that she wasn't a diva. Some people think of her as a person who just had a lot of husbands and a lot of jewels, et cetera. But besides that, she had a great soul. She had a lot of love to give. She had many friends who were not celebrities, not rich, not society people. And she was as good to them as she was to her movie star friends. She didn't make any differentiation between the rich and the poor, the famous and the non-famous. Most of all, she was good to everybody, and I hope this book will show people that there was another side to her.

'My Elizabeth' goes on sale March 23, and is available for pre-order at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).