



# When **DISASTER STRIKES,** THEY **RESPOND**

SEAN PENN AND ANN LEE OF CORE RECEIVE THE L.A. PRESS CLUB'S BILL ROSENDAHL PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

BY MALINA SAVAL

As the coronavirus surged and a global pandemic took hold, Sean Penn, the co-founder and Board Chair of Community Organized Relief Effort, knew that he had to take action. Just as the two-time Oscar-winner (for his lead turns in *Mystic River* and *Milk*) had done in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, dragging survivors through the brackish flood waters, and in the aftermath of the catastrophic 2010 Haiti earthquake, aiding victims of a disaster that killed an estimated 250,000 people and displaced an additional 2.3 million, Penn watched as the coronavirus battered the world, and instinctively leapt to its rescue.

Penn and Ann Lee, CORE's co-founder and CEO, rallied to raise funding, set up what would become the largest COVID-19 testing site in the United States, at Dodger Stadium, and bolstered communities from

Atlanta to Navajo Nation that desperately needed help. For that work, Penn and Lee tonight are being honored with the Bill Rosendahl Public Service Award for Contributions to Civic Life.

"We saw the rapid escalation of COVID-19 cases in Los Angeles—our own backyard—and knew it was essential to take action, without hesitation, in order to save lives," Penn said in an interview with *Variety*. "It goes without saying that the federal government, in a seismic failure of leadership with the previous administration, simply did not step up quickly enough to the grave national circumstances we all found ourselves in, which made CORE's resolve to carry out our mission even more urgent. We took our lead from medical experts who understood what we were up against, and implemented testing and other essential ser-



Above: Lee at Dodger Stadium.

Penn and Lee at Dodger Stadium, where they helped set up what had been the largest COVID-19 testing and vaccination site in the U.S.



Olivia Fougeot



Top: After Hurricane Florence struck North Carolina in 2018, causing massive flooding, CORE worked with the Lumbee tribe with muck outs, roof repairs and eventually house repairs and preparedness training of youth.

Left: 2019 debris removal in the Bahamas in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian.

vices aimed at giving communities the best shot at minimizing the rate of infection and, most regrettably, the death toll."

Penn and Lee, a career humanitarian with degrees from NYU and Johns Hopkins, became fixtures at Dodger Stadium, doling out nasal swabs and test kits. They worked tirelessly, providing health services and PPE to those in need, and rallying members of government on both the local and national levels to get the coronavirus crisis under control.

Through its fixed sites and mobile testing units, CORE has thus far administered 5.6 million free COVID-19 tests in the United

States (about 4 million of those in Los Angeles) and 1.8 million coronavirus vaccinations (1.4 million in L.A., with more than 430,000 at Dodger Stadium). CORE has administered more than 177,000 vaccines in Georgia, and nearly 88,000 in Chicago.

CORE is currently operating 62 mobile vaccination units and 23 testing sites in California, Chicago, New Orleans, Washington, D.C. and Robeson County, NC. The work is international as well, with CORE administering 60,000 vaccines in Brazil, Puerto Rico and India.

Meanwhile, CORE has not turned away from responding to other disasters. In the



**PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD SEAN PENN AND ANN LEE**



Nilaya Sabnis

Above: In 2015, the Haiti Takes Root initiative planted trees in Canapé Vert, Haiti, with the help of school children.

Above, right: Lee visits the Navajo Nation. CORE is partnering with Protect the Sacred to distribute hygiene kits directly to families to promote sanitary habits during the pandemic.

Right: Penn visits a site in 2017 with J/P Haitian Relief Organization, the predecessor to CORE.



wake of Hurricane Ida, CORE is on the ground in New Orleans, working with the Louisiana Department of Health and World Central Kitchen to provide shelter, roof repair and tarping, and emergency food services, as well as COVID-19 testing and vaccines.

Nor has CORE stepped back from its work in Haiti. In late August, on the heels of a 7.2 earthquake that once again ravaged the country—as well as the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse—Penn and Lee returned to the nation of 12 million to help in efforts to rebuild. CORE, the only disaster response organization on the ground with local Haitian leadership (there is a full-time staff of 150 CORE employees), is providing medical relief, emergency shelter, food, water and other essential resources to those in need. CORE is also partnering to administer COVID-19 vaccinations at 20 sites across Haiti.

"We are bracing ourselves for what might

come in the future," says Lee. "We're doubling down on really making sure that the population in Haiti is as safe as possible. And, you know, we understand how difficult it can be working in Haiti, especially during these times of crisis and political upheaval. But we're not at all considering giving up on it. We will be there and we will figure it out. Our Haiti team is always at the ready to jump back into the COVID space, and we roll with the punches."

For Penn and Lee, "rolling with the punches" is an essential requirement. There is forever work to be done, and constant obstacles stand in one's way. But their collective will to overcome challenges, and their relentless spirit, drives them both to succeed.

"There's nothing in front of us that I feel we can't figure out," says Lee. "Nothing is impossible."

"Saving lives—that's tangible," says Penn. "We'd all like to be saving lives; surgeons do it a lot. What was incredibly rewarding this past year-and-a-half, for so many reasons beyond COVID, was to be able to be part of a group, not just in terms of coronavirus testing but particularly in terms of vaccinations, which automatically give people peace of mind. People had not had peace of mind in a year. And this world has been so chaotic, so just to have that one thing, that was so critically important. To know, I've been vaccinated. I'm not going to die from this thing. That has been awesome."

For more information on CORE or to donate, visit [coreresponse.org](http://coreresponse.org). 🐾



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**SEAN PENN & ANN LEE**

FOR BEING HONORED WITH THE

**LA PRESS CLUB'S  
2021 PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD**

