



Oprah Winfrey

Also known as: Oprah Gail Winfrey, Oprah (Gail) Winfrey

(1954-)
Talk Show Host, Actress, Broadcasting Executive

Birth: January 29, 1954 in Kosciusko, Mississippi, USA

Ethnicity: African American

Occupation: Television Talk Show Host

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Overview

Oprah Winfrey revolutionized the talk show market with her unique and natural style and rose to become the host of the most watched daytime show on television, which boasts 22 million viewers daily (three-fourths of whom are women). She is the first African American to own her own TV studio. The multitalented Winfrey is also a millionaire businesswoman, a talented actress, owner of a movie production company, and committed philanthropist.

Personal Life

Oprah Gail Winfrey was born January 29, 1954, on a farm in Kosciusko, Mississippi. She was supposed to be Orpah, from the Bible, but for some unknown reason, she has been known as Oprah almost from birth. Her unmarried parents, Vernon Winfrey and Vernita Lee, separated soon after she was born, leaving her to be raised by her maternal grandmother. "She certainly wasn't an educated woman, but she taught me the shape of letters, and she taught me my Bible stories," Winfrey recalled in *Life* magazine. By the time she was six, Winfrey had moved to Milwaukee to live with her mother. During this time, she was sexually abused by a teenage cousin and then by other male relatives and friends. "I was, and am, severely damaged by the experience [of abuse]. All the years that I convinced myself I was healed, I wasn't," she told *Redbook*. "I still carried the shame, and I unconsciously blamed myself for those men's acts."

Winfrey had a contentious relationship with her mother, often acting out as a bid to gain attention. Once she faked a robbery in her house, smashed glasses, feigned amnesia, and stole her mother's purse, all because she wanted newer, more stylish glasses. It seemed Winfrey was heading down a road of destruction until her mother sent her to live with her father in Nashville at age 14. Winfrey said her father saved her life. He was very strict and provided her with guidance, structure, rules, and books. He required his daughter to complete weekly book reports, and she went without dinner until she learned five new vocabulary words each day. She joined her school's drama club and became a prize-winning orator, winning a \$1,000 college scholarship after delivering a short speech entitled "The Negro, the Constitution, and the United States" to 10,000 Elks Club members in Philadelphia. She was the first black woman to win Nashville's Miss Fire Prevention title. In 1971 she was named

Miss Black Tennessee. In 1976 she graduated with a degree in speech communications and theater from Tennessee State University.

In 1986 Winfrey received a special award from the Chicago Academy for the Arts for unique contributions to the city's artistic community and was named Woman of Achievement by the National Organization of Women. The *Oprah Winfrey Show* won several Emmys for Best Talk Show, and Winfrey was honored as Best Talk Show Host.

In addition to her numerous daytime Emmys, Winfrey has received other awards. In 1993 Winfrey won the Horatio Alger Award "given to those who overcome adversity to become leaders in their fields," according to *Jet* magazine. She was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 1994 and received the George Foster Peabody Individual Achievement Award, one of broadcasting's most coveted awards, following the 1995-1996 season. Further, she received the IRTS Gold Medal Award, was named one of America's 25 Most Influential People of 1996 by *Time* magazine, and was included on Marjabelle Young Stewart's 1996 list of most polite celebrities. In 1997 Winfrey received TV Guide's Television Performer of the Year Award and was named favorite Female Television Performer at the 1997 People's Choice Awards. In 1998 *Entertainment Weekly* named Winfrey the most powerful person in show business.

Winfrey has used her popularity and influence to advocate for political causes as well. In 1991 the tragic story of a four-year-old Chicago girl's molestation and murder prompted Winfrey, a former abuse victim, to propose federal child protection legislation designed to keep nationwide records on convicted abusers. She did this with the help of former Illinois governor, James Thompson. In addition, Winfrey pursued a ruling that would guarantee strict sentencing of individuals convicted of child abuse. The result was a bill signed by President Clinton that allows child care providers to check the background of prospective employees.

Winfrey resides with her partner, Stedman Graham, in a condominium on Chicago's Gold Coast. She also owns a house in Tennessee and a Wisconsin condo. In 2001 she purchased a 42-acre seaside estate on the Santa Barbara coast for \$50 million. She volunteers time with a variety of nonprofit organizations, churches, shelters, and youth programs.

Career Details

While in college, Winfrey already knew what she would do--pursue a career in broadcasting. As a freshman in college, she was twice offered a job by the Nashville CBS affiliate. Initially, Winfrey refused both overtures, but on the advice of a speech teacher, who reminded her that job offers from CBS were "the reason people go to college," she decided to give the station a try. She became, at age 19 and still a college sophomore, the coanchor of the evening news. When she left Tennessee State, Winfrey headed to Baltimore to become a reporter and coanchor of ABC affiliate WJZ-TV. The station sent her to New York for a beauty makeover, which Winfrey believes was her assistant news director's attempt to "make her Puerto Rican." She also attributes the makeover to an incident when she was told her "hair's too thick, nose is too wide, and chin's too big."

Nonetheless, Winfrey continued to excel. Around 1977 she became a cohost on the *Baltimore Is Talking* show, which, under her leadership, boasted better ratings than Phil Donahue's talk show. After seven years in Baltimore, Winfrey was hired by the general manager of WLS-TV, ABC's Chicago affiliate, after he saw Winfrey in an audition tape sent in by her producer.

Winfrey seemed to have a magic touch that could turn humdrum programs into interesting shows with solid ratings. In January 1984 she became anchor of the ailing *A.M. Chicago*, a morning talk show that consistently placed last in the ratings. Winfrey did a complete overhaul of the show, changing its focus to current and controversial topics. The effect was immediate: one month later the show was ranked even with Donahue's program. Three months later it had inched ahead. In September 1985 it was renamed the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and was expanded to one hour. In a matter of months, Winfrey's show was syndicated to television stations in more than 120 American cities. Subsequently, Donahue moved to New York. Just a year after the show was renamed, it made its national debut, and within five months it was rated the third most popular show in syndication--after the game shows *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy*. Moreover, it was the number one talk show, reaching upwards of 10 million people daily in 192 cities.

"When I first got the job, I was just happy to be on TV," Winfrey told *Jet* magazine. "But as the years evolved, I grew and wanted to say something without the show, not just be a television announcer or a television performer, but I wanted to say something meaningful to the American public and culture."

The tremendous popularity of her program soon gave Winfrey these opportunities. When Quincy Jones saw her show in 1985, for example, he immediately thought of casting her in a movie he was coproducing with director Stephen Spielberg. *The Color Purple*, based on Alice Walker's novel and starring Whoopi Goldberg, featured Winfrey as Sofia, a proud, assertive woman. Critics praised her performance, and she was nominated for an Academy Award. Though Winfrey had never had any formal acting lessons and little exposure to the theater, she enjoyed acting and went on to take other significant parts.

This exposure piqued Winfrey's interest in television and cinematic productions, prompting her to form her own production company, Harpo, Inc., in August 1986. Harpo has produced several television programs based on stories written by black authors, including *The Wedding* and *Before Women Had Wings*. Winfrey once told *Ms.* magazine that "I'm starting a minority training program ... specifically to bring more people of color into the film and television industry as producers."

Winfrey has committed to stay with her daytime show--which has outperformed every other syndicated talk show in television history--at least through the 2004 season. In a press release, Winfrey noted, "I am finally at a point in my life where I'm doing the kind of shows I've always wanted to do, helping people see themselves more clearly and to make choices that lead to more fulfilled lives. We're still running on." In 1996 and 1997 she was third on the *Forbes* list of the world's highest-paid entertainers, after grossing a combined total of \$201 million, and in 2001 she was listed among the 10 most influential people in publishing. In 2001, with an income of \$900 million, she placed 280 on the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest people in America.

Winfrey purchased the movie and television rights to several books, including Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, and has an exclusive agreement to produce feature films for the Walt Disney Motion Pictures Group. The first film under the agreement was the 1998 release of Toni Morrison's best-selling novel *Beloved*. In addition to serving as producer, Winfrey also starred in the film, and its commercial failure wounded Winfrey deeply. "I felt like I was behind a wall," Winfrey told *Newsweek*. "I could hear people laughing, and I could feel that I should be happy, but I wasn't because I was so deeply saddened." The film made \$23 million, just half of what it cost to make.

Winfrey worked through her despondence by working harder. In late 1998 Winfrey became involved with the formation of Oxygen Media, which includes a cable television station aimed at women, and debuted in February 2000. In conjunction with Oxygen, Winfrey created a series *Oprah Goes Online*, detailing her adventures with friend Gayle King as they learn how to use the Internet. Since its initial debut, the Oxygen Network has stumbled in the ratings, and Winfrey has become less involved in the project. In addition to her media projects, in 1999 Winfrey joined the faculty of Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management to teach the course "Dynamics of Leadership." Winfrey's partner, Stedman Graham, is the coteacher. Needing to lighten her daily schedule, Winfrey stepped down from her teaching position in 2001 but is reworking her curriculum for publication on the Internet.

In April 2000 Winfrey was highly successful in launching a lifestyle magazine for women called *O, The Oprah Winfrey Magazine*, with a subscription base of 2.5 million readers. According to Winfrey's website, <http://www.oprah.com>, *O* "gives confident, smart women the tools they need to explore and reach for their dreams, to express their individual style, and to make choices that will lead to happier more fulfilled lives."

Social and Economic Impact

Winfrey cultivated a reputation for championing causes in her programs and ventures that other leading media and entertainment companies ignore. She is most interested in productions that no one else will do because the topics are not sensational enough. Jeffrey Jacobs, Winfrey's lawyer, manager, and chief adviser, told *Ms.*: "Because of our economic status, and because of Winfrey's other talents, we're going to bring things to the screen that no one else will be able to do ... She can develop or buy something that no one else will think is commercially viable because she thinks the message is important and people should see it.... If we can make money, great. And if we don't, well, there are other reasons to do projects besides making money."

One of the most influential projects Winfrey has tackled is literacy. The on-air reading club she started in September 1996, "Oprah's Book Club," boosted book sales so dramatically that Winfrey quickly became the most important book marketer in any communications medium. Books featured on her show have often been catapulted to the top of the best-sellers list--all the more significant because her choices are often "literary" novels that would not normally attract a mass audience. "Don't confuse Winfrey with Diet Coke," wrote Martha Bayles in *The New York Times Book Review*. "For all her power, she is not part of some blockbuster machine.... On the contrary, she focuses on a category of books voted least likely to succeed in the

marketplace.... [Perhaps Oprah's success shows] the difference between pandering to the lowest common denominator and offering people something uplifting."

"Doing this book club has given me the courage to pursue the things I care about," Winfrey told *Life* magazine. That courage has led to many philanthropic endeavors. She established Oprah's Angel Network in 1997. In its inaugural year, Oprah's Angel Network raised over \$3.5 million to fund college scholarships for students with financial needs. Beginning in April 2000, the Angel Network has been handing out "Use Your Life" awards every Monday on Winfrey's television show. The awards of \$100,000 each are given to people who use their lives to better the lives of others. Winfrey has also entered a partnership with Habitat for Humanity, which has 10,000 volunteers helping to build houses for impoverished Americans throughout the country. She is helping minority students get a better education through her involvement with A Better Chance, a Boston-based privately funded program that provides bright inner-city youth with the opportunity to attend college preparatory schools. She gives proceeds from her inspirational video "Oprah: Make the Connection" to A Better Chance. In June 2001 Winfrey did a tour of self-help seminars entitled "Live Your Best Life." In September 2001 she cohosted a memorial service held at Yankee Stadium for the victims of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Winfrey has made generous contributions to charitable organizations and institutions such as Morehouse College, the Harold Washington Library, the United Negro College Fund, and Tennessee State University, and in February of 2000 she was honored by Coretta Scott King at the Salute to Greatness Awards dinner at the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

"My prayer to God every morning on my knees is that the power that is in the universe should use my life as a vessel, or a vehicle, for its work," Winfrey told *Redbook*. "I feel positive about the future, but I do believe that we are in a time where there are forces of good and evil in TV making themselves known," she commented in *Good Housekeeping*. "I'm always trying to figure out how to take the power I have and use it." Her 1997 comment to her TV viewers is perhaps the best summary of Winfrey's approach to her work: "The opportunity to have a voice and speak to the world everyday is a gift. And I thank you for allowing me this gift."

PERSONAL INFORMATION