

Oprah Winfrey

Kosciusko, Mississippi ' Milwaukee ' Nashville ' Baltimore ' Chicago ' Montecito, California

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Orpah Gail Winfrey was born on January 29, 1954, in Kosciusko, Mississippi, to an unmarried teenage mother. Her name on the birth certificate was misspelled, and Oprah stuck. She spent her early years on her grandmother's farm, then in Milwaukee with her mother, then in Nashville with her father. She has spoken publicly for decades about the poverty and abuse of her childhood.

Work. The Oprah Winfrey Show ran for 25 seasons from 1986 to 2011, syndicated to more than 150 countries, leading Nielsen daytime ratings for 24 consecutive seasons. Harpo Productions, founded in 1986, gave her ownership of her own show. She later launched O, The Oprah Magazine (2000 to 2020) and OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network (2011).

Impact. She defined the one-on-one long-form celebrity interview. She made Toni Morrison and Isabel Wilkerson bestsellers. She moved more than 55 million books through the Book Club she founded in 1996. She became the first Black woman billionaire on the Forbes list in 2003 and has held that position without interruption.

Legacy. The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa, opened in 2007, has graduated more than 600 students. The founding \$21 million gift she made to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture put her name on the Oprah Winfrey Theater. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013 and the AFI Life Achievement Award in 2023.

The Network

Stedman Graham

Partner of more than 35 years. Educator, author, and executive coach. Met Winfrey in 1986 and has been her partner without interruption. They became engaged in 1992 and have stated publicly they chose not to marry.

Sidney Poitier

Mentor. The first Black actor to win the Academy Award for Best Actor. Mentored Winfrey through her early film years after her 1985 Color Purple nomination. She has described him as the figure who showed her how a Black artist carries a public life.

Gayle King

Best friend of more than 50 years. CBS Mornings anchor and longtime editor-at-large of O, The Oprah Magazine. They met in 1976 as young employees at WJZ-TV Baltimore and have spoken daily for nearly five decades.

Maya Angelou

Mentor and close friend. Poet, memoirist, and author of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Mentored Winfrey from the mid-1980s until her death in 2014. Winfrey has called her the mother-sister-friend who formed her view of her own work.

For Discussion

1. Winfrey was removed from the Baltimore news anchor desk in 1977 for crying on air during a house-fire story. What standards of on-air composure were being enforced in 1977, and how have they shifted across the four decades since? Which public figures have made showing emotion itself part of the format?
2. Harpo Productions gave Winfrey ownership of her own show in 1988. She was the first Black woman to own a major United States television production studio. What is the specific difference, economically and editorially, between hosting a show and owning the studio that produces it, and which later Black broadcasters have replicated that structural move?
3. Oprah's Book Club moved more than fifty-five million books across twenty-five seasons. One media platform reshaped what a generation of American readers encountered. What obligations does a platform of that reach take on when it begins functioning as a de facto editorial gatekeeper, and what do the limits of that power look like when the selections miss or overreach?
4. Winfrey founded the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls outside Johannesburg in 2007 with a forty-million-dollar opening gift. More than six hundred graduates have continued to university. What kinds of results should a single private boarding school deliver to justify the investment, and how does the school's record compare against the alternatives for South African girls' education over the same period?
5. Winfrey has made cumulative gifts of more than twenty-five million dollars to Morehouse College, which trained Martin Luther King Jr. among many others. What are the specific historically Black colleges and universities that have received the largest Black-entrepreneur gifts in the last two decades, and what is the strategic logic of concentrating philanthropy on historically Black higher education rather than on more broadly-targeted programs?

Primary Sources

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