

# Oprah Winfrey

Winfrey, Oprah



## Record Information

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Date: b. 1954–

Also Known As: Oprah Gail Winfrey;

## Description:

One of the most influential and powerful women in American broadcasting, Oprah Winfrey is a successful talk show host, producer, actress, and philanthropist. In the mid-2000s, she launched a multimedia venture called Oxygen Media, as well as *O* magazine.

Born on January 29, 1954, in Kosciusko, Mississippi, to unwed teenage parents, **Oprah** Gail **Winfrey** endured a childhood that included extreme poverty, sexual abuse, and the birth of a stillborn child when she was only 14. **Winfrey**'s life finally turned around in 1968 when she went to live with her father in Nashville, Tennessee, and began to make the most of her talents. Bright and outgoing, **Winfrey** blossomed at Nashville's East High School, taking part in school plays and other activities. In 1971 she entered Tennessee State University to study speech and performing arts. **Winfrey** had already begun working part time as a radio announcer during her senior year at high school. She continued to pursue this line of work while in college and soon began earning substantial amounts of money. By 1976, only a few credits short of her degree, **Winfrey** decided to pursue her media career in earnest; she left Nashville and took a new job with WJZ-TV in Baltimore. After a brief stint as a news reporter, a job for which she felt ill-suited, **Winfrey** hit her stride as the cohost of a morning show entitled *People Are Talking*. The success of the show led to still greater opportunities. In 1984, **Winfrey** moved to Chicago and became the host of a half-hour talk show, *A.M. Chicago*. Forced to compete with a nationally popular program hosted by Phil Donahue, **Winfrey** was up against heavy odds. But viewers responded to her intelligence, openness, and energy; she inspired them to believe that they could overcome the obstacles in their path, just as she had. Within a year, *A.M. Chicago* was the top morning program in the city. The station expanded its time slot to an hour and renamed it *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Long interested in acting, Winfrey broadened her horizons in 1985 when she played the role of Sofia in Steven Spielberg's film *The Color Purple*. Winfrey's performance earned her an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress and made her known to a nationwide audience. Her recognition increased even more when *The Oprah Winfrey Show* went into national syndication in 1986, placing Winfrey in every major TV market.

Winfrey earned \$30 million from the syndication deal, and she used that money to start her own company, Harpo Productions (*Harpo* is *Oprah* spelled backwards). Winfrey spent \$20 million to buy and renovate a huge production facility in downtown Chicago. She then bought all the rights to her show from Capital Cities/ABC; as a result, Winfrey receives all the revenues from each new syndication deal.

With a vast audience tuned in to her show every weekday, Winfrey's influence on popular tastes became truly phenomenal. If she recommended a diet, an exercise program, or a book, millions of people followed her lead. But by 1994, after eight years of unparalleled success, Winfrey began to talk about leaving television and seeking new challenges. Ultimately, she decided to stay on and revitalize her show. To set herself apart from the numerous Oprah Winfrey imitators filling the airwaves, she moved away from lurid topics and concentrated on weightier subjects, including child abuse and drugs. In 1996, she also introduced the Oprah Book Club (a feature that in April 2002 she decided would no longer be monthly). Once a month, Winfrey would present a book to her viewers that she had personally read and enjoyed. The usual result was a phenomenal increase in sales for the featured book. Viewers loved the new focus and format of the show, and in 1995 Winfrey signed a new syndication contract running through 2000, with the provision that she could quit whenever she desired, an option that she repeatedly declined. Winfrey renewed her syndication agreement two more times before announcing in 2009 that the 25th season of her show would be her last. The final episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* aired on May 25, 2011.

A telling sign of her potential influence on public buying habits occurred when the beef industry sued her for a 1996 show that focused on the dangers of eating beef. Winfrey was cleared of all charges in 1998. When "Oprah's Favorite Things," an annual episode during which she distributed gifts to her studio audience, debuted, sales of products shown on the program skyrocketed. Being named one of Oprah's Favorite Things virtually guaranteed that a company would be instantly swamped with orders in the hours following the episode.

In the mid 1990s, Winfrey branched out into producing films and TV specials, and later, motion pictures and publishing. In 1998, Winfrey realized a long-time personal project when she produced and starred in the film version of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In 2000, she launched her own women's magazine, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, published by the Hearst publishing group. This move established her as a factor in virtually every entertainment medium. She further expanded her media influence in 2000 when she co-founded the Oxygen Network, a cable channel aimed at women. In 2011 she collaborated with Discovery Communications to launch OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network). The network features a variety of original programming, including talk shows, lifestyle programs, and reality shows, including a behind-the-scenes look at the final season

of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. While Winfrey plans to make frequent appearances on the channel, she intends to scale back her on-camera involvement in favor of working behind the scenes at OWN and focusing on her numerous philanthropic endeavors. Since 1997, Forbes magazine has repeatedly ranked Winfrey as the highest-paid entertainer in the United States, estimating her 2010-2011 income at \$290 million and her net worth at \$2.7 billion. Winfrey has always been eager to share her success; she has been a major supporter of her alma mater, Tennessee State University, the Family for Better Lives Foundation, as well as the Oprah Winfrey Foundation, which she created. She founded a school, the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2007, and through her Oprah's Angel Network, she has raised more than \$80 million in support of educational endeavors and disaster relief around the world. An avid world traveler, Winfrey owns multiple homes in settings as diverse as Maui, Colorado, and Antigua, though she spends most of her time at her 45-acre estate in Montecito, California.

## References and Further Information

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