

Oprah Winfrey - An American Icon

By Marilyn Reeves

Possibly having the most recognized name in the entire world, Oprah Winfrey is the embodiment of the American “rags to riches” phenomenon.

Her life began January 29, 1954. Although raised in poverty, Oprah overcame the hardships of her childhood and, at age 19, began her career as a television personality co-anchoring the evening news on a small station in Tennessee. Her charming gift of gab was soon noted by the producers of a talk show in Chicago where she rose to fame, and soon became the owner of her own nationally syndicated production company called Harpo.

Oprah didn't look like the typical celebrity – she was considerably overweight, a problem she has dealt with her entire life. Throughout the years of her daily talk show, her audience witnessed her going from heavy to slim and back again, but I think she finally decided that she'd rather be plump and happy than thin and hungry. I applaud her for both her extreme efforts to lose the weight as well as ultimately acknowledging that she wasn't meant to be thin.

The face that Oprah presents on camera is quite glamorous, but she readily admits that her beauty is largely an illusion created by her makeup artist. Occasionally she has allowed her audience a glimpse of the face behind the mask, and she looks almost as bad as I do when I first get up in the morning! Exposing her secret to the world speaks highly of her character.

Over the years I watched Oprah interview celebrities from movie stars to statesmen. The first time I ever saw Barack Obama was on Oprah's show, and I personally believe that that initial exposure helped propel him to the presidency.

Another special guest was Mattie Stepanek. Rather than despairing that he was confined to a wheelchair, or that his life would be cut short by his muscular dystrophy, that amazing little boy devoted what time he had left to writing poetry, filled with wisdom and spiritual insight far beyond his years. And his bravery was an inspiration to all.

The only time Oprah made me cringe was when she virtually “fried” an author by the name of James Frey, whom she publicly tore into a “million little pieces” for not having revealed that he had used some creative license while writing his autobiography. Since she had helped to promote the book, Oprah felt that omission made her look foolish in the eyes of the public.

But despite her occasional displays of pride, Oprah has done more good things with her life than any other individual I can think of.

Oprah is famous for her lavish give-away shows – “You get a car, and YOU get a car!” that made her audience scream with excitement. But she also concerns herself with political and social issues. A few years back she even worked with Nelson Mandela to create a school for girls in South Africa.

But I personally believe that her greatest achievement has been in helping to bridge the gap between the races, which has been an enormous boon to American society. And for that, if nothing else, I think Oprah Winfrey deserves a standing "O"!