



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Heroes and Role Models: Whoopi Goldberg”

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What is a hero? He or she is a person who has done something that you admire and think is extraordinary but don't necessarily want to do yourself. They have accomplished something great and have “gone the extra mile” to achieve it. Often, the person has to take a risk and have courage along the way: courage to do something different, or to place themselves at personal risk, either physical or emotional or both. For me, the person must not just accept all the praise, honors and attention. They must be humble enough to remember their struggle, and not just immodestly live in glory. The person should also have the humility to support those who follow him or her, who have struggles they have not yet overcome.

A role model is a person who you wish to emulate. However, I believe you can have a role model who has a past you don't approve of, a role model who you want to be like but not live in their shoes all the time. And I think you can have a role model and hero who is one person. Someone who has done things that you admire but that you do not want to do, but who also has done things you wish to achieve too.

For this essay, I wanted to choose a strong woman character that cares about education, is compassionate, and cares about her family. She would have to believe in justice and equality for all, and work to further these beliefs. I started to look at strong women from the early 1900s, and I became interested in sweatshop workers. At the time, however, I was working on my family values essay, and I came to realize that any hero or role model of mine must have a connection to creative expression. Alan, my mentor and I, threw around some names, one of whom was Whoopi Goldberg. Whoopi Goldberg is very creative and embraces other of my family values and beliefs. She seemed like a great choice for a hero and role model.

At first my parents, and Peter and Myrna were skeptical. They felt that the person I chose needed to reflect my values and beliefs, not just be a superstar performer, I dreamed to be like. I read some books and “googled” her. We learned about her contributions to many causes and I watched her stand up comedy routine. Her routines were filled with political commentary. But I also had to address her “checkered” past. Could I choose a person who had engaged in many activities that I felt were wrong, selfish, and self destructive? After much thought I decided, Yes! Conquering obstacles can make a person a hero. I know that people should be looked at for all they have done, not just one aspect of their life. Heroes and role models are people too, with strengths and faults. What Whoopi Goldberg has overcome is a sign of her heroism which I admire but do not want to emulate. Her career accomplishments and how she uses her stardom are the qualities which I aspire to, the role model aspects of Whoopi Goldberg.

I aspire to become a performer like Whoopi Goldberg. I have the same love of performing as she does. She uses the stage to help express her feelings and helps other people's voices be heard. She helps give expression to their feelings. Her monologues include her opinions about life, political issues and her value of free expression. The content of her monologues are satirical in that they make fun of issues, and include her views on them. In these riffs, she also reminds her audience, about the importance of tolerance for everyone. Having the content of her creative expression focus on justice, and other important issues, sets her apart from other performers who sometimes keep their views to themselves, and limit their contributions to financial ones, only.

Whoopi Goldberg's real name is Caryn Johnson. She changed her name because she thought Caryn Johnson was too boring. At first she thought it would be great to have the name Whoopi Cushion, like the gag pillow. She claims it's because when she performed she often felt full of gas by the time the show ended, she felt like she sounded like a whoopee cushion. But her mother told her she would never be taken seriously with that name. So she decided on Goldberg, claiming that she is partly Jewish, although there is no proof of that according to her biography. In her autobiography, she quotes an African proverb, "It's not what you call me, but what I answer to". How people view her, what they call her, is meaningless, unless she internalizes it by responding to that name. a true lesson for all of us!

Whoopi became the second African American woman to win an academy award, for Best Supporting actress, for her role in "Ghost." But before this, her life was not so celebratory. In her younger years, Whoopi had much more trouble just staying alive, let alone winning awards.

Whoopi was born in NYC in 1955. She lived her first years of life in an unsafe housing project in Manhattan. Later, in high school, she dropped out, and became addicted to heroin and LSD. She enrolled herself in a drug rehabilitation program and succeeded in overcoming her addiction to drugs. She married her drug counselor and had one daughter. All this she did before she was twenty years old.

After her marriage ended, she moved to California with her daughter. She started improvising at theater groups where she got her name and her career blossomed. Overcoming these hardships, yet using them as a springboard for her work, is what makes Whoopi Goldberg heroic to me. Also, what she has overcome has reinforced to me what I don't want to do, which is another way she is a hero to me.

One of Whoopi's goals, I believe, is to make people question the way they think. This goal is important to me too. I too, always want to affect people in a positive way and make them think. A lot of the time when she performs Whoopi shares her opinions and tries to affect the audience in a positive and strong way. In her show "Whoopi on Broadway," she is straightforward and strong in her opinions. An example is her strong opinion that the war in Iraq has gone way off course. She began saying this two years ago, when there was much more support for the war.

Though some may think Whoopi is too over the top, I think she does this to get her point across. She does not try half way. She goes all out and that's what makes her so extraordinary. I think that the reason that Whoopi and I like affecting people through performing is because we can make it our own. It is an art form. Whether I am singing or dancing, I am trying to get something of my own to affect the audience. Its genuineness has a greater impact on people.

Whoopi performs to help raise money for those causes she believes in. In 1987, Whoopi co-hosted with Billy Crystal and Robin Williams, HBO's now historic, "Comic Relief Benefit" for the nation's homeless. Comic Relief II, III and IV raised a total of \$40 million. And there is more. She raised money for hurricane Relief, AIDS awareness for children, and the House of Ruth which raises money for domestic violence victims and the homeless.

Whoopi also donates time to TEEN INK magazine by allowing teens to interview her for that magazine. Her support of causes raises awareness of them. Also, more people may support the cause because she does. I hope that someday I too will be able to use performing to express myself and help other people by voicing their needs and helping them to express themselves and grow.

To my surprise, I learned that sometimes Whoopi does not just convey a meaningful message through comedy. In addition to performing she sometimes does this by writing and contributing to important books. Among the book she has written were, *Alice*, a children's book which was published in 1992, and *Book* which came out in September 1997. This became a New York Times best seller. She also wrote the preface to *Breaking the Walls of Silence: Aids and Women in NYS Maximum Security Prison* (Bedford Hills). The importance of her contribution, although it was only one page in a 200-page book, is that it helped people focus on this issue because someone "famous" was contributing to it. She contributed to the book because she recognized that had she continued to use drugs she might have been a subject of the book, in prison and with AIDS. She admitted in the preface that thinking about what to write made her confront herself.

She also had to confront herself when asked to contribute to the book, Open the Unusual Door, True Life Stories of Challenge, Adventure and Success by Black Americans. The book is a collection of essays by people all of whom have overcome personal struggles. The "unusual door" is a challenge that changes peoples' lives. By taking the challenge and making the choice they all did "heroic" deeds. Whoopi was asked to contribute and wrote about when her 14-year old daughter announced to her that she was pregnant. Even though she had supported and had spoken out in favor of pro-choice, her daughter's situation gave "pro-choice" a new meaning. Choice to have a baby, not just choice to have an abortion. Whoopi wrote, "I had to take my beliefs out for a little test drive... It means women have the choice to do whatever they want..; even if it smacked into what my choice would have been for her... She taught me pro-choice is not just a phrase." For me this is an important lesson. First it reminds me that I don't want to be a parent so young. It also showed me how stating one's beliefs or position about an issue becomes very different when you have to confront it personally. Facing it forces you to think about the issue differently. It's one thing to state a belief; it's another if you have to live it! It's easier to talk the talk than walk the walk!

It is funny how our world is so separated and divided when we are all so similar. We all have issues and we are not perfect. Yes, Whoopi and I are different. But who would have thought we had so much in common? Definitely not me. It just shows that if we think and put race and backgrounds behind us we can really see who people are. If we all just put race behind us and look for commonalities among ourselves, wouldn't that make us heroes and role models, too? I think it does. Now it just means we have to step forward and do it!