

AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES

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Whoopi Goldberg biography

Whoopi Goldberg's great-great grandparents, William and Elsie Washington, were among a very small number of African Americans who became landowners through homesteading in the years following the Civil War. Two generations later, her grandparents were living in Harlem, her grandfather working as a Pullman porter.



Co-Produced By
Thirteen/WNET New York
and Kunhardt Productions



Whoopi, born Caryn Johnson on November 13, 1955, grew up in the multicultural public housing projects of New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. She made her performing debut at age 8 with the children's theatre at the Hudson Guild community center.

In 1974 at age 19, Whoopi moved with her daughter to California. There, she performed with the San Diego Repertory Theatre and joined the improv group Spontaneous Combustion, where she first adopted her stage name and developed her distinctive character monologues. She later moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she created her one-woman piece *Spook Show*.

In 1983, the director Mike Nichols saw her perform and the following year presented her on Broadway in a self-titled one-woman show. She was then cast in the lead role of Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), her debut film role for which she received an Oscar nomination. In 1986 she co-hosted with Billy Crystal and Robin Williams the first *Comic Relief* program to benefit America's homeless.

Whoopi won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Oda Mae Brown in *Ghost* (1990), subsequently starring in the *Sister Act* films (1992, 1993) and appearing in Robert Altman's acclaimed film *The Player* (1992). In 1997, she became the first woman ever to play the role of Pseudolus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. She returned to Broadway in 2003, starring in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and in 2004 starred in a 20th-anniversary production of her original one-woman show. She is the first female and first solo African American to host the Academy Awards ceremony. In addition to her Oscar, Whoopi has also won an Emmy, Tony and Grammy Award.

press information

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