



American talk show host Oprah Winfrey stands in front of hundreds of children in Durban, South Africa, December 2002. The children are some of the tens of thousands who will receive gifts of food, clothing, athletic shoes, school supplies, books and toys as part of Winfrey's philanthropic trip for her charity, the Oprah Winfrey Foundation

KINGDOM, POWER, GLORY

Beneficent billionaire Oprah Winfrey rose from poverty to be a media tycoon and galvanising philanthropist. Now, some see her as a spiritual leader and worthy of a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. But, asks *Sue Russell*, what does Oprah want?

Rendering fans star-struck, awe-struck, and all but hypnotised is business as usual for Oprah Winfrey. Reportedly the first female, African-American billionaire, her fortune is estimated at US\$1.46 billion. To call her rise comprehension-defying is a profound understatement. The Oscar-nominated actress is a powerhouse producer, owner of Chicago's Harpo Studios and creator of the hit magazine *O*. In its 21st year on the air, her show is syndicated in 121 countries with over 49 million viewers.

No question, Oprah relishes her immense wealth and opulent lifestyle. Yet it's her work for children, poverty, education, public health, and women's issues that really feeds her soul.

In 2005, Oprah gave away almost \$8 million to 28 worthy organisations via her Oprah Winfrey Foundation, and wrote a per-

sonal \$10 million cheque to help Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. Her baby, the viewer-supported Oprah's Angel Network, has raised over \$50 million since its 1998 inception, and more than \$10 million in response to Hurricane Katrina. No wonder *Black Enterprise* magazine calls Oprah, 52, the leading black philanthropist in the US.

"She didn't start the Angel Network because she couldn't have helped those people herself," says Daniel Primer, a TV producer who worked with Oprah in the early days. "I believe she did it to say, 'You know what? You, as individuals, are just as responsible for helping others.' Oprah tries to encourage other people to do something pro-active, either for others or for themselves, to better their lives. And I truly believe that that is who Oprah still is."

Now, Oprah-mania is reaching a new kind of critical mass, though. In March 2005, Maryland's

Oprah Winfrey owns two residential floors of this impressive Chicago building



Top from left: Halle Berry attends Oprah Winfrey's Legends Ball at the Bacara Resort and Spa, May 2005 in Santa Barbara, California; Talk show host and actress Oprah Winfrey, recipient of the first Bob Hope Humanitarian Award at the 54th annual Emmy Awards, September 2002 in Los Angeles, relaxes with companion Stedman Graham at the Governor's Ball following the show Above from left: Janet Jackson, actor John Travolta with wife Kelly Preston and singer Tina Turner arrive at the Legends Ball 2005

Rocky Twyman founded the Oprah Winfrey for Nobel Peace Prize Fan Club, setting out to collect 100,000 signatures. If he and his supporters have their way, Oprah will one day take her place with Nobel laureates Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter and Nelson Mandela.

Twyman's campaign was "inspired by God" after seeing Oprah at a fundraiser where she wrote a \$1 million cheque to a charity helping the children of incarcerated parents. "Everybody was chanting 'Oprah! Oprah!'" he recalls. "She gave a testimony to God and just really impressed me. It was a magnificent feeling. Then one night, God just sort of woke me up and I wrote out the concept."

Initially, it was just Twyman and one other volunteer standing in front of a Metro public transportation stop with their little petition. Now they're closing in on 30,000 signatures

internationally (oprah4peaceprize.org) and have supporters like Sierra Leone journalist Hannah Foullah and Simo Ben Bachir, the campaign's Middle East and Europe chair.

Some Oprah fans hail her as a spiritual leader, others see a potential US presidential candidate. Oprah soon squashed the president idea. Twyman, for one, was disappointed but understands because he believes she transcends politics.

"She's more effective where she is," he concedes, "raising the awareness of the critical issues of AIDS, hunger, poverty and equality. Because when people are hungry or have AIDS, nothing else matters. These things really divide the world and prevent world peace from happening."

As for being a spiritual leader – suffice it to say that Oprah thinks even Hollywood fan-style adoration is unhealthy for both parties. "I feel

embraced by people's love," she says of her following. But the woman who said, "My soul, I think, came here to inspire" isn't seeking a purpose; she already has one. And it's TV that allows her near-daily dialogue with the world.

Oprah Winfrey had a rough start. She was born into poverty on January 29, 1954 in rural Mississippi. Her family assumed her fate would be to work in white people's kitchens. (Oprah had bigger ideas and thought she might teach.) Abandoned by her mother while she was a baby (they have since reconciled), she was terribly lonely, a victim of child molestation, and had a stillborn baby as a teenager. Yet her strict father's insistence that she read a book a week sowed the seeds for her love of books.

Bright and naturally driven, she has a BA from Tennessee State University. By age 17, she'd broken into radio broadcasting. At just 19,

in 1973, she anchored TV news in Nashville. Her timing was perfect. She concedes that she never would have broken into television had there not been a civil rights movement: "I got my first job in broadcasting, unquestionably, no doubt, because I was black and I was female."

By 1986 she was in Chicago making her mark with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Not given to false modesty, she takes credit for her own success and attributes her show's longevity to her autonomy; to being "at the steering wheel from the beginning."

Now her empire is built and her fortune amassed, this unapologetic fan of designer dresses and Manolo Blahnik shoes feels no guilt about her vast wealth. After a recent trip to Africa, she purred: "I'm going home to sleep on my Pratesi sheets right now, and I'll feel good about it."

She so loves the royal treatment that LA's exclusive Bel-Air Hotel has customised a suite for her, with Italian silk curtains and a hand-stenciled ceiling. In Chicago, she has a two-storey apartment overlooking Lake Michigan. But Promised Land, the Santa Barbara estate Oprah calls her "paradise," is home. She reportedly paid \$50 million for the 23,000 square-foot, Georgian-style mansion in 2001. Nestled on 42 secluded acres amidst rolling hills, mountains and the Pacific Ocean, it has an orchard, a lake, two ponds, a pool and a tennis court.

She shares it with her longtime love Stedman Graham, 55, and their beloved cocker spaniels. If you want to irritate Oprah, ask why she and Stedman have never married, for this very public woman still has a lingering private side. Four years after their 1992 engagement, she said: "I have the right to not get married. I'm sorry I ever was such a big-mouth frog about the engagement. That is my biggest public regret."

Her toast to the tall, handsome founder of S. Graham & Associates, a sports and entertainment marketing firm at his 40th birthday



Above: Hillary Clinton presents Oprah Winfrey with a piggy bank full of change from the White House for Oprah's Angel Network in the 1990s. Oprah's Angel Network, which includes the donation of spare change from viewers, will send one child from each state to university. Opposite page from left: Television personality Gayle King, a close friend of talk show host Oprah Winfrey; Oprah Winfrey (right) views the flood-ravaged Ninth Ward in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana, September 4, 2005

ing her grounded) and entertaining guru Colin Cowie spent a year planning it. No detail was too insignificant. If a soup bowl was too deep, Oprah spotted it. Twenty thousand white peonies were reportedly shipped in from Israel and Ecuador.

A highly emotional Legends' luncheon kicked off the weekend. Oprah, looking radiant in a sea-green cocktail dress, thanked her 25 honourees for inspiring her – women like opera star Leontyne Price, activist Coretta Scott King, singer Roberta Flack, poet Maya Angelou and Tina Turner. She then introduced her honourees to young legends-in-the-making like actresses Angela Bassett and Halle Berry, and singers Mariah Carey, Janet Jackson and Alicia

Keys. To Oprah, it was an electrifying "hallelujah moment" bringing them all together.

More champagne flowed at that evening's white tie ball at the nearby ritzy Bacara Resort with more famous faces present, like Reverend Jesse Jackson, Spike Lee, Maria Shriver, Quincy Jones, Barbra Streisand, John Travolta and Tom Cruise. A rousing gospel Sunday brunch back at Oprah's pad topped things off. As voices rose in song, guests sipped Bellinis and Bloody Mary's on the front lawn amidst the majestic redwoods; the same trees under which Oprah so loves to relax with a book.

Oprah will treasure the memory of her Legends weekend, just as she treasures her special mentor/friends like Quincy Jones, Bill Cosby, Sidney Poitier, and Maya Angelou. If there's a major theme in her life it is her spirituality, and that means using her power for good.

"The responsibility of people who have money and fame and some kind of clout is to use that in a meaningful way," she told *US News & World Report*. "There is also responsibility for me to always be thoughtful and never flippant."

Since having her DNA tested and discovering her African tribal heritage (she's a Zulu), her connection to Africa is stronger than ever. She took gifts for 50,000 orphans – mostly AIDS victims – to South Africa on her December 2002 Christmas Kindness tour and, inspired by the childrens' obvious joy, had an epiphany. "In that moment it hit me," she told *TV Guide*. "Now I see why I am not married. Now I see why I never had children. I am supposed to work with these children."

She's now excitedly building the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa's Gauteng Province in partnership with the Ministry of Education. There'll even be a fireplace in the library so the girls can sit by it and read in winter (one of Oprah's own great pleasures) and it will feel like a real home. Believing that "education is everything," she is sure that this 26-building, 22-acre campus for 450 girls can change thousands of girls' futures, directly impacting Africa's own future.



Recently, Oprah's Angel Network Center for Learning opened – another collaborative effort and the first vocational training centre to be rebuilt following the tsunami. Two hundred students a year will learn carpentry to rebuild homes and hospitals, outboard motor repair to rebuild the fishing industry, sewing, carving and computer technology. And women will have the chance to learn skills previously only available to men, thereby helping to transform the community's gender dynamics.

First Books is another organisation Oprah loves. Dedicated to getting first books to needy children from low-income families, it has distributed over 40 million new books since 1992. It was given a massive \$250,000 grant after Hurricane Katrina as they rushed to get books into the hands of children with no schools or homes.

Another beneficiary, LA's Food From The Hood, started life with kids growing vegetables for the local poor. It evolved into a sales enterprise that turns profits into college scholarships and markets its own all-natural salad dressing. Receiving the 2002 Use Your Life Award, executive director Monique Hunter received a \$100,000 donation. A big thrill? "Are you kidding?" says Hunter. "Definitely! It placed me on the map. Everyone always says, you're the one who met Oprah. It was a very good moment in our organisation's career."

"Ms Winfrey's philanthropic work has set the standard for our country and perhaps the world. It has assisted me in defining my true

aspirations – to be a philanthropist. She represents what true mentorship is – helping an individual to develop his/her vision for the future. Oprah does this by example."

With her shows, Oprah creates real change in diverse people's lives on a daily basis. Most are uplifting, and even the heartrending stories convey the strength and beauty of the human spirit. Oprah would never humiliate or degrade guests on TV to entertain others. She meditates regularly, and takes a quiet moment before each show to prepare to "put out good."

Daniel Primer believes the key reason Oprah's career initially took off was "because she represented a lot of people who felt like her. The daytime viewer related to her struggles, not only in weight, but self-esteem, relationships and family. She gave people of all races hope."

Starring in Steven Spielberg's acclaimed film *The Color Purple* propelled her from local Chicago celebrity to international star overnight. "And simultaneously being a national celebrity as an actress, and one of the original successes in syndicating a television series," notes Primer, "really mapped out her whole future."

Linda Henman PhD, author of *The Magnetic Boss: How to Become The Leader No One Wants to Leave*, says there is no single reason Oprah is such a phenomenon, it's the package: "She's real. She doesn't pull any punches, admits her mistakes, tells the world about her struggles with weight, problems in childhood, etc. She's every woman's girlfriend. She's also a gifted journalist who came through the ranks when

Angel Network has built 48 schools in 12 countries

party was: "Stedman, you have my heart and you are the love of my life. I couldn't have gotten through the past 10 years without you." Nowadays, however, she says very little. Certainly, there's no mention of wedding bells. Reportedly, they're quite content as they are.

A social creature, Oprah loves to see her house overflowing with friends and 2005's piece de resistance was her Legends Ball, a weekend of festivities more formally known as A Bridge to Now – A Celebration for Remarkable Women During Remarkable Times. She, Gayle King (the longtime best friend Oprah credits with keep-

Oprah's extravagant Californian estate. She purchased the property in 2001 for a rumoured US\$55 million. Since then, she has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars more renovating and customising the home. The property with its lush gardens and breathtaking views, El Descanso, is set in two acres of the most desirable property on the Pacific Coast. The main house is a 14,000 square foot mansion: "A brilliant example of 1920s Spanish colonial." Even with modern touches, like an updated gourmet kitchen and high-tech theatre, the home maintains its original 1920s feel. The spacious mansion also includes 6 bedrooms, 14 bathrooms and 10 fireplaces. Oprah is currently having a man made lake developed in her garden and friend Tom Cruise has bought a house close by



there weren't many women, and were no blacks. Her talent gave her the opportunities, but her tenacity made it happen."

When Oprah dazzles studio audiences with gifts – she once surprised 276 deserving folk with new Pontiac G6 cars – she's like Santa Claus in a designer suit. But the largesse is one thing, Oprah's real genius is in heart-tuggingly connecting with strangers.

Take Karole Brownson, 56. Raped twice over 30 years ago, she'd never felt she could share her secret. "That was one of the dirtiest feelings," she sighs. But hearing Oprah – who is now fighting to have child molesters put in prison for life – talk about being molested as a child "was like a bolt of lightning hit me," Brownson recalls. "I thought, 'Oh my God! She doesn't have to talk about that on TV! Maybe it's okay to talk about it?' Oprah completely changed my life."

Nobel campaign activist Hannah Foullah was far from Sierra Leone in Leeds, England when she first saw Oprah in the mid-'90s. "I thought, 'Wow!'" she recalls. "A beautiful, successful and glamorous black woman doing a job not many black people get to do. I was impressed! Oprah made me believe in myself and gave me confidence. She got me talking and thinking deep, and served as a journalistic role model to me. She signified what and who I could be.

"Now I'm director of broadcasting of Sierra Leone's Radio Democracy. And I'm sure Oprah will feel proud that although she doesn't know me, she positively influenced and still influences my life – and through me, the lives of many other Sierra Leoneans."

TV's Dr Phil McGraw was one lucky beneficiary of Oprah's ability to create stars – and serves as a good example of her tenacity and faith in her own instincts.

"Oprah was integral to Dr Phil's success," says Sophia Dembling, co-author of *The Making of Dr Phil*. "There's little doubt that Dr Phil would still be working behind the courtroom scenes as a litigation consultant if Oprah hadn't entered his life. She went out on a limb, standing up for him after his first appearance on her show, when her producers and audience hated him. She brought him back a second time, but first explained to her audience why she was so impressed with him. This time, they 'got it.' Oprah actually changed her audience's minds and persuaded them to like something they'd hated."

How closely does the real Oprah match her television image? Her executive producer Ellen Ratieten says, "She's the ultimate girlfriend, she's as fun as they come." On air, she's warm approachability personified. But some former



Oprah Winfrey with former South African President Nelson Mandela discussing the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa

guests claim that she only interacted with them when the camera was rolling. Then, she's a busy woman. One of the planet's most recognisable interviewees, Oprah is rarely interviewed.

"She *has* to be less approachable or she'd never have a minute's peace," says Linda Henman. "I tell CEOs to guard their time and to have an assistant whose body others have to walk over to get to them. It's the only way a person of power can have a life."

Not everyone is an Oprah fan, of course. She favours freedom of speech, yet curtails her own employees' freedom by making them sign life-long confidentiality agreements. Linda Henman sees nothing sinister in this, however.

Employees, she notes, "know where the bodies are buried, and employers need to protect themselves from bad press and reputations. We don't really care about the secrets of most companies but people would line the supermarket aisles for the 'scoop' on Oprah doing almost anything. No one cares if I go on a diet, but the world watches her waist every day."

Katrina Bell McDonald, associate professor of sociology at the US's Johns Hopkins University, puts black women under the microscope in her new book, *Embracing Sisterhood: Class, Identity and Contemporary Black Women*. While eliciting opinions on race, class and gender from 88 African-American women, she learned that some feel they share a "special" black women connection with Oprah, yet fail to see themselves represented in her show.

Its emphasis on personal transformation likely short-changes African-American women with major issues on their minds, like reforming social institutions. While Oprah could easily shine a light on such things, McDonald and others see a lack of attention paid to the "continued struggle among African-American women by virtue of their gender-ethnic status; a lack of focus on African-American women and what unites them."

McDonald speculates that Oprah, "like many other prominent blacks, may be reluctant to advance a black womanist agenda publicly for fear of being accused of undermining her universal appeal."

Yet she finds much to commend in Oprah and knows her road to success must have involved compromise:

"There is no success in this country for African-Americans that is free of compromise with white power, and male power for that matter," McDonald says. "Oprah is no different. Her industry is a fierce one, and I can only imagine that she has made many difficult decisions that she knew would be criticised as 'acting white'."

"But for the most part I trust what I see in Oprah. I am immensely grateful for the deep thought she apparently puts into every move she makes, and that she indeed *makes* a move where others don't." □