

D E N Z E L

DEFINED

Throughout his long and impressive career, the award-winning **Denzel Washington** has played many varied parts. Perhaps none is more life-changing than his longtime role as national spokesperson for Boys & Girls Clubs of America. The organization helped shape him, and today, as its most famous alum, he inspires kids to follow his lead

Photograph by Lorenzo Agius/CTMG, Inc.

BY MATT McMILLEN



Walking to Nathan Hale elementary school in Mount Vernon, N.Y., Denzel Washington passed the construction site for the Boys Club building each morning, anxious to get inside.

"I was 5, 6, maybe 7 years old, and I couldn't wait," Washington recalls. "My mother took me there when it finally opened, and the rest is history."

The two-time Academy Award winner and star of the new film *The Equalizer* says the Boys Club of Mount Vernon (later renamed the Boys & Girls Club) helped set the foundation for his success, and he's been the national spokesperson for Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) for more than two decades now. "I'm asked to do a lot of things, but this is one [cause] that I can speak honestly about," says Washington, 59. "I know what was done for me there, and I'm sure there are thousands of young men and women who can attest to the same difference it made in their lives."

Washington, who grew up in Mount Vernon, a city just north of the Bronx, was the son of loving but busy parents. His father was a Pentecostal minister who worked two jobs during the week and preached on Saturdays and Sundays. His mother owned and ran a beauty parlor. Washington needed a place to be after school, and the club gave him a safe haven from the streets.

"The lessons that I first learned at home and at church and then later at the club kept me from getting into any serious trouble," Washington says. Of course, he didn't know that then. He was simply thrilled to have a place to play, a place to be around boys his own age. "We were being taught good lessons along the way, but as a kid, that's not what I went there for."

Still, the club made an indelible mark upon him in his 12 years there. Washington recalls with affection a number of the club staff members who acted as counselors and mentors to the many boys who came through the doors. Charles White was one of them.

"I remember him saying to me, 'You're a very smart young man and you can do anything you want in life.' I don't know if that was the truth," Washington says with a laugh, "but I remembered it. Up to that point, I'd never thought of myself that way. Having an adult tell a child something positive like that is a powerful thing. Words are powerful. I remember leaving the club and walking home and thinking, 'Wow, I can do something.' I didn't know what that meant at 8 years old, but I never forgot it."

Club Kid

Today, BGCA hosts close to 4 million kids in more than 4,000 clubs throughout the United States and on U.S. military installations around the world. More than just a place to play, the clubs work to keep kids in school, help them excel while there, and prepare them for the future.

The clubs support kids' academic efforts through programs like the new summer Brain Gain initiative, which helps students retain what they learned during the school year so they're ready to hit the books come September, says Jim Clark, BGCA president and CEO.

"Kids often lose math and reading proficiency during the summer months," Clark says. "And we know that kids coming from low-income, under-resourced, and economically challenged households tend to not have access to the experiences and opportunities that kids in middle- and upper-class families have. That's a leading contributor to learning loss over the summer months and why they enter the school year behind before it even starts. Brain Gain gives them a running start."

BGCA has grown enormously, both



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in its reach and its impact, and Clark points to Washington as a major influence on the nonprofit's expansion over the past 20 years.

"When Denzel Washington stepped forward to become our national spokesperson, BGCA was a different, much smaller organization," Clark says. "He is the one who brought our

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WebMD Chief Medical Editor

brand to life. We were not on the top of the charts of recognized national nonprofits, but we are today. Denzel has done so much for this organization and for kids today in terms of being a guiding light, role model, and mentor."

Washington has stayed involved with the organization on a local and national level. In April, he brought 50 boys and girls from his club in Mount Vernon to Broadway to watch him portray Walter Younger, the male lead character in the Tony-nominated revival of Lorraine Hansberry's classic drama *A Raisin in the Sun*.

This summer, Washington recorded a public service announcement for the launch of BGCA's Great Futures campaign. "It's a wakeup call to really call attention to the issues that children in America face: poverty, high school dropout rates, obesity," Clark says. "We're bringing those issues together and calling attention to them as kids prepare to go back to school. We want to give kids the tools to be successful in school, but also to be successful beyond school, in life. After school, at Boys &

Girls Clubs, we can help them build the right infrastructure."

No one is more pleased with Washington's positive impact on the BGCA than the actor himself: "I'm as proud of that as anything I've accomplished."

Solid Foundations

And he has accomplished a lot. In addition to his two Oscars (one for 1989's *Glory* and the other for the 2001 film *Training Day*) and four



Read **Helping a Child Build Self-Esteem** to set a good foundation from the start.

[LEARN MORE ON PAGE 6](#)

DENZEL'S LIFE LESSONS

Denzel Washington has done more than absorb and benefit from the lessons his mentors have taught him. He's made a point of passing them on to others, especially kids, including his own. Here are his tips for growing into greatness.

Connect with others, not computers. "Computers, cell phones, and video games are just ways to keep you on your backside. Get out, run, exercise, and really interact with each other. Emails, texts, and Instagrams are not real human interaction."

Seek role models and mentors. "Everybody says Michael Jordan was the greatest basketball player, but they can't forget that he played for one of the greatest coaches of all time. Even his natural ability would have only taken him so far without the mentorship, the leadership of great coaches."

Learn from the past, but don't dwell on it. "When people ask me what's my favorite movie I've made, I tell them the next one. I don't really look back and reminisce. Instead, I enjoy the process of making movies, the sense of discovery."

Be open to possibilities and to the input of others. "Acting sort of found me. I had never thought about being an actor or planned on being an actor, but once I got into it, I fell in love with it. Acting was something that I was good at, something that I enjoyed, and it was something that people told me I had a natural ability for. That encouragement was essential."



Watch Denzel talk about the Boys & Girls Club.

LEARN MORE ON P. 6



Oscar nominations, Washington has two Golden Globe awards and a Tony award. He's played Malcolm X, anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, high school football coach Herman Boone, and gangster Frank Lucas as well as a host of other real-life and fictional characters during his three-decades-and-counting Hollywood career.

One secret of his great success came to him from Billy Thomas, director of the Mount Vernon club when Washington was a youngster. "I learned early on from him that your natural ability will only take you so far," says Washington, who discovered acting while a student at Fordham University in the Bronx. "I remembered that and I applied it when I started acting."

For Washington as a young actor, that meant he would not allow himself to coast on his newly discovered talent. Instead, he worked even harder to learn from others and refine his craft. "I had a lot of early success, but I told myself I had to go back to school and study."

After graduating from college in 1977, Washington left New York for San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater graduate program. Soon after, he met his future wife, Pauletta, on the set of the made-for-TV movie *Wilma*. They married in 1983 and have four children.

His oldest, John David, is a former professional football player turned actor. This fall, he co-stars

with Dwayne Johnson (known as "The Rock") in the new HBO dramedy series *Ballers*. He's got the acting gene, his father says, but he's also got the work ethic.

"I told him his natural ability would only take him so far, and so he's been in New York for eight months studying Shakespeare and other classic plays," Washington says. "The same thing that was told to me 40, 50 years ago and that I applied to my life, I have passed on to my son and he's applying it to his life. I have passed that on to all my children."

The Right Fit

A healthy lifestyle figured into Washington's early life lessons as well. His club's counselors helped him learn the importance of a good diet and regular exercise, essential for health, but also, Washington says, for his career.

"My body is my instrument, and you've got to take care of your body," Washington says. "I know how to eat. I know what I should do. Even those lessons go all the way back to the club."

For the past 15 years, since he trained for his 1999 portrayal of boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter,

his favored workout has been boxing. "It's my basic training," he says. "Not getting hit in the head, but boxing training. There's a real science to it, and it's great cardiovascular work. It keeps me young, it keeps me sharp, and it keeps me healthy."

In late May, while performing on Broadway eight times a week in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Washington managed to squeeze in four workouts a week. When he's not working, he boxes five days a week. He bumped his routine up to six days to get in shape for filming *The Equalizer*, a high-octane adaptation of the CBS television series that ran from 1985 to 1989.

Washington says that as he gets older, he's had to work harder to avoid gaining weight between jobs. For him, that means even vacations must include plenty of exercise. He favors swimming, a full-body workout that's easy on his joints.

"I know that I've got to do something, try to keep some kind of exercise going," he says. "As Terry Claybon, my boxing trainer, says, 'If you know the way, you won't get lost.' I do know the way. I know what I have to do."

Washington also pays close attention to what he eats...most of the time. He admits to a weakness for Häagen-Dazs Dulce de Leche caramel ice cream, which he'd eaten just before the interview. "We could all do with more vegetables, but I'm not doing too bad right now," Washington says. "Ice cream is as bad as it gets."

Well, not quite.

"We're talking about guilty pleasures? OK. The other day I ate Cocoa Puffs. I ate Cocoa Puffs, man," Washington admits. "I went to the store, and I looked up at the boxes in the cereal aisle, and the Cocoa Puffs were calling me. But I ate them, just one bowl, before I went to work out. I guess what I'm saying is: moderation. Anything taken to the extreme is an error. Don't OD on Cocoa Puffs—but if you drink too much water you'll drown."

Washington's not afraid to be humble. He knows he didn't get to where he is today on his own. He's had many guides along the way: his parents, his club counselors, and his church leaders, from whom he's taken valuable lessons like this one: Though you may stumble at times, you'll get the rest of the way with hard work and the help of others.

"It ain't easy and it takes discipline," Washington says. "My pastor, A.R. Bernard, says that to achieve your goals, you must apply discipline and consistency. I really like that. Between your goals and your achievement lie discipline and consistency. And I know that in terms of my regimen and what I need to do when I train, and I'm trying to apply it just in the way I live. I'm trying. You do your best. You know what the ideal is. And whether you're able to stick with it 100% or not, at least you know what the measuring stick is."

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FINDING A MENTOR

Denzel Washington traces much of his success back to his mentors at what is now the Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon.

Kids everywhere can benefit from a relationship with a caring, interested adult who helps them build character and confidence. Many mentoring programs are available to help kids stay in school and excel, while giving them guidance for their futures. And recent research shows

that a strong mentoring relationship also can help counter depression.

Jean Rhodes, PhD, a psychologist and research director for the University of Massachusetts Boston's Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring, explains how to get the most out of the relationship.

ID the right program.

"Look at organizations that have real infrastructure, trained volunteers, and a good track record," says Rhodes, author of *Stand by Me: The Risks*

and *Rewards of Mentoring Today's Youth*.

Make it age appropriate.

Early adolescents, teens, and young adults benefit the most from mentoring, Rhodes says. "That's when mentors can have a profound effect in terms of identity development, social and emotional development, and role modeling."

Give it time. Ideally, the mentoring relationship will last at least a year, but the longer the relationship, the better the outcome. "There's definitely

a dosage effect," Rhodes says. Research does not show benefits from shorter programs.

Stay the course.

Make sure the mentor you choose for your child commits to a specific period and sticks with it. "The keys are consistency and longevity," Rhodes says, "and if a mentor quits early, the mentoring relationship can do more harm than good."

To find mentoring resources, check out *The Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring*.