

16 **Extraordinary** Americans with Disabilities

Second Edition

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To the Teacher

According to *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2004, second edition), “High-interest, low-difficulty texts play a significant role in an adolescent literacy program and are critical for fostering the reading skills of struggling readers and the engagement of all students. In addition to using appropriate grade-level textbooks that may already be available in the classroom, it is crucial to have a range of texts in the classroom that link to multiple ability levels and connect to students’ background experiences.”

Biographies about extraordinary people are examples of one such kind of text. The 16 Americans described in this collection should both inspire and reassure students. As students read, your instruction can include approaches that will support not only comprehension, but also learning from passages.

Reading and language arts skills not only enrich students’ academic lives but also their personal lives. The *Extraordinary Americans* series was written to help students gain confidence as readers. The biographies were written to pique students’ interest while engaging their understanding of vocabulary, recalling facts, identifying the main idea, drawing conclusions, and applying knowledge. The added value of reading these biographies is that students will learn about other people and, perhaps, about themselves.

Students will read stories demonstrating that great things are accomplished by everyday people who may have grown up just like them—or maybe even with greater obstacles to overcome. Students will discover that being open to new ideas, working hard, and believing in one’s self make them extraordinary people, too!

Structure of the Book

The Biographies

The collection of stories can be used in many different ways. You may assign passages for independent reading or engage students in choral reading. No matter which strategies you use, each passage contains pages to guide your instruction.

At the end of each passage, you will find a series of questions. The questions are categorized, and you can assign as many as you wish. The purposes of the questions vary:

- **Remembering the Facts:** Questions in this section engage students in a direct comprehension strategy, and require them to recall and find information while keeping track of their own understanding.
- **Understanding the Story:** Questions posed in this section require a higher level of thinking. Students are asked to draw conclusions and make inferences.
- **Getting the Main Idea:** Once again, students are able to stretch their thinking. Questions in this section are fodder for dialog and discussion around the extraordinary individuals and an important point in their lives.
- **Applying What You've Learned:** Proficient readers internalize and use the knowledge that they gain after reading. The question or activity posed allows for students to connect what they have read to their own lives.

In the latter part of the book, there are additional resources to support your instruction.

Vocabulary

A list of key words is included for each biography. The lists can be used in many ways. Assign words for students to define, use them for spelling lessons, and so forth.

Answer Key

An answer key is provided. Responses will likely vary for Getting the Main Idea and Applying What You've Learned questions.

Additional Activities

Extend and enhance students' learning! These suggestions include conducting research, creating visual art, exploring cross-curricular activities, and more.

References

Learn more about each extraordinary person or assign students to discover more on their own. Start with the sources provided.

To the Student

Millions of Americans have some type of disability. Some disabilities are easy to see. But other disabilities are invisible, like learning disabilities.

Many people with disabilities have overcome the odds against them. They have done great things. They have learned to concentrate on the things that they can do and work around the things that they cannot do. They have shown great courage as they move forward with their lives.

In this book, you will read the stories of 16 Americans with disabilities who have made extraordinary contributions to our nation. The stories include:

- Laura Bridgman, the first deaf-blind child to be educated
- John Wesley Powell, the one-armed schoolteacher who explored the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon
- Washington Roebling, the engineer who built the Brooklyn Bridge while very ill and in great pain from caisson disease
- Franklin D. Roosevelt, the 32nd president of the United States, who was unable to walk because of polio
- Katharine Hathaway, an artist and writer who made a life for herself despite being physically disabled
- Walt Disney, a cartoonist and filmmaker who was called a “slow learner” as a child
- Glenn Cunningham, the greatest American miler of his time, who was badly burned as a boy
- Roy Campanella, one of the most famous catchers in baseball, who was paralyzed in a car accident
- Ray Charles, a blind singer who was known as the “genius of soul”

- Cher, a successful singer and actress who is dyslexic
- Temple Grandin, a scientist and inventor who is autistic
- Whoopi Goldberg, a comedian and actress who is dyslexic
- Mark Wellman, a paraplegic who has climbed mountains
- Marlee Matlin, an actress who is deaf
- Chris Burke, an actor who has Down syndrome
- Heather Whitestone, Miss America who is deaf

The motto on the Great Seal of the United States reads *E Pluribus Unum*. That is Latin for “Out of many, one.” The United States is made up of people of different races, creeds, genders, ages, and abilities. I hope you will enjoy reading about these 16 Americans with disabilities who have made a difference.

—Nancy Lobb

Whoopi Goldberg

Comedian and Actress

Whoopi Goldberg is one of only a few people who have won an Academy Award, a Tony, an Emmy, and a Grammy Award. She was the second black female to have won an Academy Award. She won the award as Best Supporting Actress for her role in the movie *Ghost*. She also won a Golden Globe Award for her role in *Ghost*.



Whoopi Goldberg was born Caryn Elaine Johnson on November 13, 1955. Her mother said that Caryn was a “ham” from the moment she was born. She delighted the nurses in the nursery with her funny expressions and her thumb sucking. Whoopi later said she knew she wanted to be an actress from the time she was born.

Caryn’s father left the family when she was a baby. So she and her older brother Clyde were raised by their mother. She was a nurse and later a teacher.

The family lived in a housing project in New York City. It was in a working-class neighborhood. Whoopi has said her neighbors were blacks, whites, Greeks, Jews, Puerto Ricans, and Italians. This diverse neighborhood gave Whoopi a chance to learn about a wide variety of people and lifestyles. She remembered this for use in her stand-up comedy years later.

The family was poor. But Caryn took advantage of living in New York City. She went to concerts, ballets, and museums for children. In the summer, a group called Shakespeare in the Park came to her neighborhood to perform plays.

Caryn loved to watch old movies. Caryn watched her favorite actors closely. She learned how they showed emotions. These old movies were her acting school.

Caryn attended the parish school of St. Columbia Church. She was a shy and quiet child. She did not fit in well with her classmates. Caryn thought she looked funny and was not smart enough to have friends.

Caryn was a very poor student. She had a lot of trouble reading. Later, she learned that she had dyslexia. This is a learning disability in which a person has trouble reading, writing, and/or spelling. But when Caryn was a child, they didn't call it dyslexia. Her teachers (and her classmates) thought she was just slow, maybe even retarded.

Caryn knew she wasn't retarded. If someone read the material to her, she could remember what she heard. She just couldn't read it herself. It was very frustrating for her.

At the age of eight, she became a member of a children's acting group at the Hudson Guild Theater near her home. She knew then that acting was all she really wanted to do.

The first time she acted on stage, she played the part of a teapot. She was performing a popular nursery rhyme. After her performance, she kept bowing and saying "Thank you." Finally, someone had to come get her off the stage. A star was born!

Caryn attended Washington Irving High School. She became frustrated with her schoolwork and grades. She dropped out in ninth grade. She began using drugs. Finally, she decided she wanted to do something better with her life. She entered a drug treatment program. She stopped using drugs and has not used them since. Today, she is a strong anti-drug speaker.

Caryn fell in love with her drug counselor, Alvin Martin. The two married in 1973. The next year they had a daughter they named Alexandra. But the marriage did not last long.

Caryn moved to San Diego. She worked at several different jobs to support herself and Alexandra. She worked as a bricklayer. She worked in a bank. She went to beauty school to learn how to do hair and makeup. Caryn got a job in a funeral home doing the hair of people who had died. This job was not easy for her, so she tried to find humor in it. She said, "It was better than working on live people; they never complained about how they looked."

Caryn also began to work with the San Diego Repertory Company. (This was a group of actors.) She earned \$25 a show. She also joined a group called Spontaneous Combustion. This was an improvisational group. (Improvisation means the actors make up the show as they go along.) But even though she worked several jobs, she didn't have enough to live on. Caryn was forced to go on welfare to support her daughter.

Caryn began doing comedy routines in small clubs. She developed her own characters. She used them as part of her comedy act. These characters would later make her famous. Caryn changed her name to Whoopi Goldberg.

In 1981, Whoopi and her daughter moved to Berkeley, California. Whoopi became part of an acting group called the Hawkeyes. She continued to work on her characters. Finally, she had seventeen characters. Whoopi put the characters together to form a one-woman show called *The Spook Show*. The show got great reviews.

The Spook Show had no costumes or scenery. Whoopi created the characters using her body, her voice, and her movements. When it was time for a new character, she turned around. Then she would turn back to the audience as a different character.

Whoopi created her characters by observing people around her. She remembered small details about people. She says her characters "are people, very much living in my head." She says they are all different individuals.

In 1983, Whoopi created a new show called *Moms*. It was about Moms Mabley, a black comedian from the 1920s. Moms Mabley wore a

housecoat, a nightcap, colorful socks, and oversized shoes. She performed with no teeth! This show won Whoopi her first award as a professional actor: a Bay Area Critics' Award.

Whoopi did *The Spook Show* across the United States and in Europe. Then in 1984, Whoopi did the show in New York City. Director Mike Nichols was in the audience. He asked her to perform her show on Broadway.

Whoopi did her one-woman show called *Whoopi Goldberg* on Broadway. The show was a hit. It sold out night after night. Those who saw the show either loved it or hated it. But everyone who saw it agreed that Whoopi Goldberg was a huge new talent.

The movie director Steven Spielberg saw Whoopi's show. In 1985, he offered Whoopi the starring role in his movie, *The Color Purple*. This was a dream come true for Whoopi. She had already read the novel. She later said, "I would have taken any role in that movie—including dirt on the rug." When the film was released, Whoopi got high reviews for her work. Now she was a movie star as well as a comedian!

Whoopi was nominated for an Academy Award for her role in *The Color Purple*. She did not win. But she did win the 1985 Golden Globe Award for Best Performance by an Actress. That same year, she won a Grammy Award for Best Comedy Recording for *Whoopi Goldberg: Original Broadway Show*.

Whoopi was no longer poor. She was thrilled to have enough money to buy food. She loved buying clothes for her daughter. But she never forgot how it had felt to have nothing.

In January 1986, Whoopi, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams, and Harold Ramis founded Comic Relief. The group did a benefit performance to raise money for the homeless. Many other famous performers were on the show. Comic Relief has performed every year since then, doing its 20th show in 2006. To date, it has raised over \$40 million for the homeless.

Whoopi supports many causes. She is a strong supporter of women's rights. She supports AIDS research. She is an active supporter of children's rights. She works with Covenant House in Los Angeles. This group helps young people get off the streets. It helps them make a better life for themselves.

One of Whoopi's favorite TV shows from her childhood was *Star Trek*. In 1988, she joined the cast as Guinan, the psychic bartender. Guinan was not on every show. But she was a very popular character.

In 1990, Whoopi played a serious dramatic role in *The Long Walk Home*. The movie tells of a maid's hard life during the time of the Montgomery bus boycott. Whoopi thought this was some of her best work.

Her next movie was *Ghost*. In the movie, she played a psychic. For this role, she won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. She was the first black actress to win an Academy Award in nearly 40 years. *Premiere* magazine named her character in *Ghost* to its list of the best movie characters of all time.

One of her biggest hits was the 1992 movie *Sister Act*. In this movie, she played a singer who witnesses a murder and goes to a convent to hide. This was the first movie in which Whoopi had to sing! The movie was so successful that the studio wanted a sequel. *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit* came out in 1993. That year, Whoopi was the highest paid actress in Hollywood.

Whoopi has done a number of other movies. A few of these were *The Player*, *Made in America*, *Corrina, Corrina*, and *Boys on the Side*. She has hosted her own TV talk show. She has also hosted the Academy Awards four times. She was the first African American and the first woman to host the show alone.

Whoopi did a sitcom called *Whoopi* in 2003. A radio show called *Wake Up with Whoopi* came out in 2006. She also did a Nickelodeon show for young children called *Littleburg*.

Whoopi Goldberg is also an author. She wrote a children's book called *Alice* in 1992. Then in 1997, she wrote an autobiography called *Book*.

Whoopi has won many awards. She is one of four actresses in history to have won the “Quadruple Crown.” That means she has won an Academy Award, a Golden Globe Award, an Emmy Award (for TV), and a Tony Award (for her show on Broadway). She has also won a Grammy Award and many People’s Choice Awards. She was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2001.

Whoopi Goldberg has come a long way in her lifetime. Her teenage years were years of poverty, drugs, and welfare. Today, she is a successful actress.

Whoopi Goldberg, who had dropped out of school in ninth grade, believes that people should keep on learning in life. She once said, “You try something and get hit in the face with a pie. So you realize that’s not the way to do it. You go in another direction and get hit again. Finally, you find a road where you (meet success). That’s what I’m working toward.”

In 1985, Whoopi was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Charleston. The words on the degree read: “To experience Whoopi Goldberg is to expand your mind, awaken your conscience, and view the world through new eyes.”

Remembering the Facts

1. What did Whoopi learn from watching old movies?
2. Why did Whoopi drop out of school?
3. What was the name of Whoopi's first show?
4. How did Whoopi create her characters?
5. What movie did Whoopi do with Steven Spielberg in 1985?
6. What is the name of the group Whoopi founded to aid the homeless?
7. Why was Whoopi anxious to play an occasional role on *Star Trek*?
8. For what role did Whoopi win an Academy Award?

Understanding the Story

9. Why did *The Spook Show* require so much skill to do?

10. Why is Whoopi known as such a versatile actress?

Getting the Main Idea

Why is Whoopi Goldberg a good role model for young people today?

Applying What You've Learned

Create an interesting character of your own. Explain your character in a paragraph. Or do a skit for the class demonstrating the character.