

A SPIRIT THAT IS NOT AFRAID



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Octavia Spencer: A spirit that is self-made and not afraid



Octavia Spencer (Contributed by Craig Sjodin | ABC Television Group)

Photo by [Craig Sjodin](#) | The Auburn Plainsman

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The Auburn Plains have long since been home to successful people, not only on the Pat-Dye Field, but in every field and profession. From Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, to Llyod Austin III, the United States' current Secretary of Defense, Auburn University has produced brilliant alumni, even some who now grace the big screen.

Octavia Spencer, native to Montgomery, Ala., is an accomplished actress with an impressive line-up of accolades. In 2012, the star won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Minny in *The Help*, and received Oscar nominations in 2017 and 2018 for her roles in *Hidden Figures* and *The Shape of Water*—earning her the title of the first black actress to obtain two consecutive Oscar nominations.

On March 10, 2024, Spencer presented the nominees and winners for Best Original Screenplay and Best Adapted Screenplay alongside Melissa McCarthy at the Oscars.

However, before Spencer was walking red carpets, the critically acclaimed actress walked the hallowed halls of Auburn University.

She first attended Auburn University at Montgomery, then transferred to Auburn University at Auburn, where she graduated in 1994 with a bachelor's degree. Spencer majored in English, double minoring in theater and journalism, with the intention of going to law school.

"My mom didn't want me to major in acting," Spencer said. "She never diminished that dream for me, but of course, I changed my dream to be a lawyer because I knew that would have made her proud."

Spencer's mom, who passed when she was 17, has been her biggest inspiration—in her career, and in her life. Losing a parent at such a formative age caused Spencer to realize how much she didn't know about the world.

"I just remember being raised to be such a strong Southern woman of faith," Spencer said. "She has had the most lasting impression on my life because there's so much that I would love to ask her about the world and her worldview now."

Although Spencer wound up with a wider audience than that of a jury, she still harbors a fondness for the letter of the law.

"I would have enjoyed being in the legal field, but my passion and my calling is acting and producing, so I take her [Spencer's mom] with me with every character I play," Spencer said.

The spring after her mom's passing, Spencer found her first film internship working on the set of *The Long Walk Home*, which starred Whoopi Goldberg and Sissy Spacek. Spencer obtained the internship through sheer perseverance.

"I found out where their office was and I called them every day, and when they realized it was me calling every day, they stopped answering," Spencer said. "Then I would just go over there, and they finally said, 'Okay, you can be an intern.'"

Spencer, still reeling from the loss of her mother, felt unmoored. She wanted to "join the circus" by moving to Hollywood.

Whoopi Goldberg, however, reminded her of the promise Spencer made to her mother, the promise that she would attend college. Hollywood, Goldberg asserted, would always be waiting for her.

"When I got to Auburn, I basically did what most kids do in four years, in three," said Spencer. "I took a lot of classes. I didn't have the regular college experience, but it was exactly what I needed."

While Spencer was working towards earning her degree, she worked as a waitress at Pizza Hut. As someone who had to balance both work and school, Auburn football games and studying with friends felt like her extracurricular activities.

It's Spencer's memories of studying that led her to partner with Auburn Student Affairs in 2021 and 2022 to host War Damn Finals Cram. The program treated students to free food during finals week via several food trucks and a kickoff feast at The Edge dining hall.

"It's important for me and I wanted to help create some fond memories, because some of my fondest memories are around cramming for finals," Spencer said.

Aubie also played a pivotal part in Spencer's time at Auburn, during both college and childhood, so when Spencer was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in December 2022, she asked that Aubie attend with her.

"I wanted to make sure Auburn had a special part in my special day," said Spencer. "To have Aubie there was like having the whole Auburn family with me."

Spencer has reminded the world of not only her Auburn pride, but her English major roots as well. She is the author of two children's mystery books, *The Case of the Time-Capsule Bandit* and *The Sweetest Heist in History*.

Upon relocating to Los Angeles, Spencer had to work a day job while waiting to audition. At times when she wasn't working, it felt like she had too much idle time on her hands.

The actress knew she wanted to write mysteries for children because, having read every Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew book, mysteries are what saved her reading life as a kid. She wanted to combine her love of mystery with forensic science in a way that was palatable to children, so she started jotting ideas down.

Next thing she knew, Spencer was writing a children's book. The actress and author is an advocate for "stepping out on faith and believing in yourself."

Spencer believes that staying creative can prevent people from getting golden handcuffs: jobs that pay well, but don't fuel one's passion.

Not taking chances, Spencer advises, can leave behind feelings of unfulfillment; she encourages creative minds to embrace their creativity, to take risks.

"If you're a musician, you have to play, and if you're a writer, you have to write," Spencer said.

Spencer states that she had the most fun trying to reach her goals—all of the disappointments, all of the victories that are gathered in a lifetime function to inform one's work.

"The creative field will always be rife with insecurity, but you just have to stick to it and find your tribe," Spencer said.

Spencer, along with a few members of her own tribe—Melissa McCarthy, Allison Janney and Sherri Shepherd—were grouped together and had to persevere together. It wasn't a feat that occurred overnight, but through preparedness and honing their craft, they all made it.

"Find the people that will take the journey with you," Spencer said. "You won't always be up at the same time, so you'll need someone to cheerlead for you—you need your own personal Aubie."

Auburn University, Octavia Spencer maintains, prepared her for the world, to meet the demands and exceed her own expectations. It is through the lens of assiduous alumni such as Spencer that current Auburn students can find inspiration, encouragement and a script to succeed.

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