

The power of Oprah

She's the most powerful woman on earth. A nod from Oprah Winfrey means instant success and millions of women live by her simple but powerful mantra – live your best life. As Queen Oprah brings 300 of her biggest fans to Sydney for the decade's most anticipated live shows, Sharon Krum reveals the secrets behind her amazing rise.

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OPRAH WINFREY KNOWS the exact hour she decided to begin evolving into “Oprah” – the woman recently named one of the world’s 100 most influential people by *Time* magazine. It’s a rare thing to see it and Oprah would probably call it a lesson, a gift.

“I was looking at a skinhead show [in 1988], and I said to my staff, ‘That’s the show that caused me to do television differently,’” she told *TV Guide* recently. “What I learned from that is you cannot allow yourself to be a vehicle that promotes the energy of hatred in any form. That was life-changing for me.”

And so Oprah, 56, began making over her show, just as she had made over her own life, filling it with stories and people who informed, motivated, taught, excited and challenged us to be our very best selves.

She became our friend and New-Age spirit guide, confidante to celebrities and champion of the voiceless and abused. She told devotees not just to listen to their souls, but how. It turned her into the most famous talk show host in history, but it’s what Oprah did with her success that the best fortune teller wouldn’t have seen in the cards.

She stepped out of our TV screens and became a mogul – a billionaire businesswoman who runs Harpo Studios, a philanthropist, school builder, TV, theatre, radio and film producer, star maker, creator of the world’s biggest book club, *O* magazine founder, actress, endorser of presidential candidates,

and, this month, the person who can turn the Opera House into the “Oprah House”. “She’s talented, ambitious, smart and has this entrepreneurial instinct that few have matched,” says Professor Robert Thompson of New York’s Syracuse University, an expert in television and popular culture. “But the key to Oprah is her unique biography and her ability to seem so intimate with us.

“Forget being born with a silver spoon in her mouth, Oprah wasn’t born with a spoon,” he says. (Oprah grew up in poverty in Mississippi). “She confesses to us about her childhood abuse, her problems with weight and she allows us to think we can reinvent ourselves, too.”

“The show hasn’t been a big part of my life. It’s been my life,” Oprah told *TV Guide*. “I didn’t have children. I had the show.”

That show and its message made her a powerhouse, but as Oprah herself has said, “Unless you choose to do great things with it, it makes no difference how much you are rewarded, or how much power you have.”

“THE KEY IS HER ABILITY TO SEEM SO INTIMATE.”

The power of Oprah
Cinderella had her fairy godmother and Oprah, whose net worth is \$2.7 billion, has her couch. Sit there and not only will your message reach millions, your career may rocket.

Just ask Dr Phil, Dr Oz, Rachael Ray and Nate Berkus (Oprah’s Harpo Productions developed their shows) or Suze Orman, Jamie Durie, Curtis Stone

and Peter Walsh – all saw their talent or books anointed by Oprah. “Oprah propelled it to an entirely different stratosphere,” recalls Elizabeth Gilbert of her book, *Eat, Pray, Love*. “She gave me this incredible platform to talk about food,” says Curtis Stone. Shown in 146 countries, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is the most successful daytime talk show and Oprah the woman everyone wants to talk to, whether it’s to celebrate a career, sell a book, reminisce, or confess pain and regret. Last month, Portia de Rossi, former president George W. Bush, Whoopi Goldberg, Barbra Streisand and Marie Osmond all sat down with her. Who else can do that? “Reading gives you the ability to reach higher ground,” says Oprah, who turned her own passion for it into Oprah’s Book Club – now two million strong online – turning many of its 64 picks, including Tolstoy and Wally Lamb, into best-sellers. *The New York Times* once estimated Oprah’s endorsement generated more than a million copies in sales, so it’s wise to stay in her good graces. After turning author James Frey into a household name with his addiction memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, Oprah later confronted him when it turned out parts were fabricated. “Now, I feel that you conned us all,” she scolded, hurt that her show and audience had been compromised. Author Jonathan Franzen also upset Oprah by admitting that he wasn’t very comfortable having his book



Far left: Oprah’s school photo, age four. Left: In 1974, WLAC-TV hired Oprah, the first female news co-anchor in the Nashville area. Right: In 2007, she opened The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa. Far right: Oprah will take her show and 300 lucky US viewers to Sydney in December.



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Oprah’s five life lessons
Politicians have slogans, but does a TV show host? Yes, if you are Oprah, whose mantra is “Live your best life”. Through her show, her magazine and by example, Oprah tells her audiences what she has learned about living a fulfilled life.

1 PURSUE YOUR PASSION
“When you’re doing the work you’re meant to do, it feels right and every day is a bonus, regardless of what you’re getting paid.”

2 FAILURE CAN BE A GIFT
“With every failure, every crisis, every difficult time, I say, ‘What is this here to teach me?’ And as soon as you get the lesson, you get to move on. If you really get the lesson, you pass and you don’t have to repeat the class. “My philosophy is that not only are you responsible for your life, but doing the best at this moment puts you in the best place for the next moment.”

3 LISTEN TO YOUR SPIRIT
“For me, there is no real power without spiritual power... When your life is on course with its purpose, you are your most powerful. And you may stumble, but you will not fall.”

4 RESPECT YOUR BODY
“Getting my life-long weight struggle under control has come from a process of treating myself as well as I treat others, in every way.”

5 GRATITUDE IS ESSENTIAL
“Be thankful for what you have; you’ll end up having more. If you concentrate on what you don’t have, you will never, ever have enough. “In order to be truly happy you must live along with and you have to stand for something larger than yourself. Because life is a reciprocal exchange. To move forward, you have to give back.”

OPRAH MOMENTS
Oprah wants her 25th and final season to be about incredible happenings. “This year is about creating moments,” she told *TV Guide*. “We’re saying to all of our celebrity friends, this is not the year you can come on and just promote your book or your song. You have to create moments.”

If anybody knows about the power of TV to start a conversation, it’s Oprah. In 1988, she wheeled 30 kilos of fat on stage in a little wagon to celebrate her weight loss – we’re still talking about that “moment”. In 1996, when Oprah started her Book Club, she made reading exciting for millions, so suddenly it didn’t feel like homework. Many of Oprah’s finest moments have been when we asked ourselves, “Did that really just happen?”

We asked it in September 2004, when 276 people in her audience went home with a new Pontiac G6. Last year, Oprah’s ratings went through the roof when she asked vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin on her show, “Did you feel snubbed?” for not being on her show during the 2008 election. “It didn’t register – no offence to you,” Sarah responded, “but it wasn’t the centre of my universe, okay?”

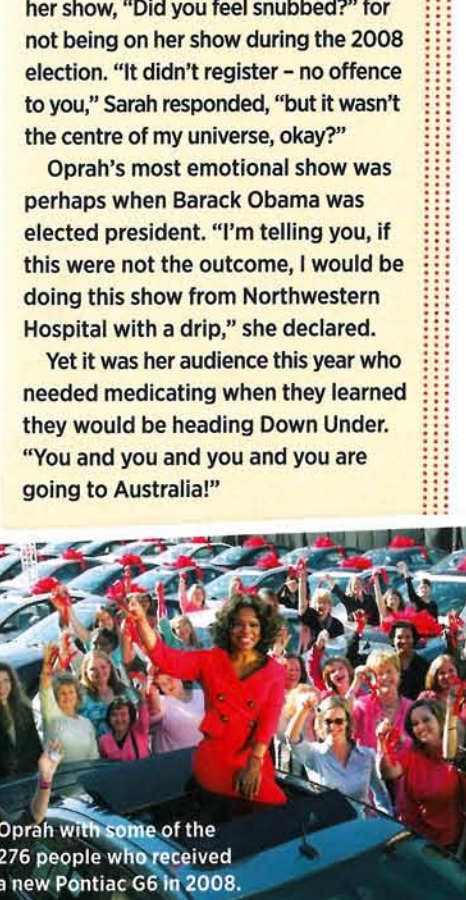
Oprah’s most emotional show was perhaps when Barack Obama was elected president. “I’m telling you, if this were not the outcome, I would be doing this show from Northwestern Hospital with a drip,” she declared. “Yet it was her audience this year who needed medicating when they learned they would be heading Down Under. “You and you and you and you are going to Australia!”

“IT’S CLEAR SHE LOVES GIVING JOY TO OTHERS.”

Will she campaign for him in 2012? There is no doubt.

Touching lives
“I don’t think you ever stop giving. I really don’t,” Oprah has said. “I think it’s an ongoing process. And it’s not just about being able to write a cheque. It’s being able to touch somebody’s life.” A big part of Oprah’s value system is taking the wealth she’s created and giving back to empower lives. Both her Angel Network and private foundation have generously donated millions to fund scholarships, schools and women, youth and humanitarian organisations across the world.

She personally gave \$10 million to build homes after Hurricane Katrina and more than \$40 million to open The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa in 2007. “Their



Oprah with some of the 276 people who received a new Pontiac G6 in 2008.



Oprah meets Mr President
All presidential candidates love a celebrity endorsement, but the big one they all coveted was the one that never came. Then Oprah met Barack Obama. “I haven’t done it in the past because I didn’t know anybody well enough to be able to say, ‘I believe in this person,’” Oprah said. After appearing at his campaign rallies and hosting a fundraiser, a University of Maryland study calculated that Oprah gave Obama an extra million votes in the Democratic primary. Obama certainly knew how lucky he was to have her on his team. “You want Oprah as vice-president?” he said when someone at a rally asked him to appoint her. “But that would be a demotion, you realise that.”

“Because Oprah has such a reputation as a tastemaker, I think her early endorsement forced people to take Obama’s candidacy seriously,” said Mark Anthony Neal, author and Duke University professor of Black Popular Culture, to BET.com. “It made Obama more than a ‘black’ candidate,” he said. “Also, given Oprah’s championing of women’s issues, her decision not to support Hillary [Clinton] struck a chord for undecideds.” The night Obama won the nomination, Oprah admitted she “cried her eyelashes off.”

The biggest gamble yet
“I’m so tired of the chairs,” Oprah told *Fortune* magazine. “For me, it’s about getting out of the chairs and into the hearts of people’s lives.” Though she’s in the final stretch of her show, Oprah is already embarking on her next move and, this time, there’s more at stake for her famous brand than anything she’s ever done. On January 1, 2011, Oprah will launch her cable channel called OWN – Oprah Winfrey Network. The programming will focus on entertainment and inspiration, with shows from, among others, Rosie O’Donnell, Sarah Ferguson and Peter Walsh. Oprah will appear on multiple shows on OWN, including a reality show about this final season.

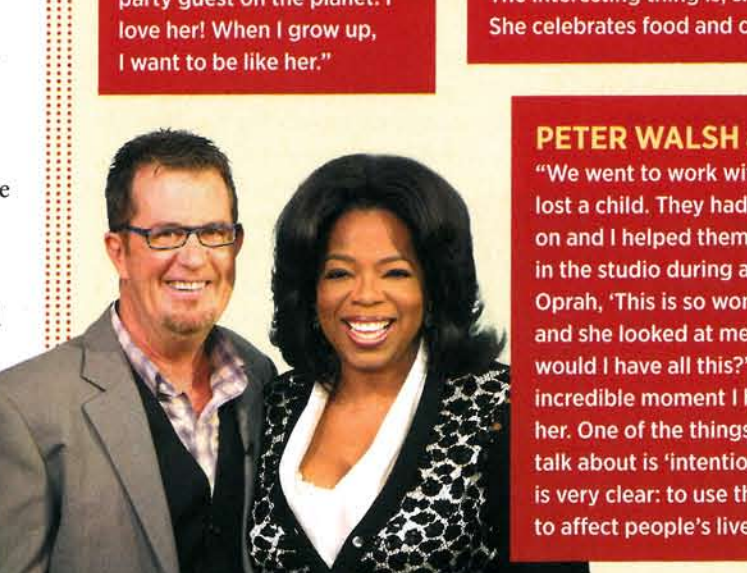
“It’s also [going to be] fun and entertaining without tearing people down and calling them bitches. Imagine that. Imagine,” Oprah said. Will OWN succeed? “Oprah doesn’t say you have to go to Harvard,” says Robert Thompson. “What she does tell you is to pay more attention to your life and take action. There isn’t a channel out there like that, so the potential is there.” She also has 4.4 million Twitter followers and, as somebody once said, the first three letters of Winfrey are “Win”. ■



“The Oprah I know”
A talented group of Australians have appeared on Oprah’s show over the years and all remember the same thing: how struck they were by her personality and passion for her work.

HUGH JACKMAN actor
“Oprah is completely authentic! The Oprah you see on screen, meeting presidents, royalty... is the same Oprah I know behind the scenes. Always curious, honest, unbelievably generous, with a heart the size of Texas! And did I mention the best dinner party guest on the planet. I love her! When I grow up, I want to be like her.”

CURTIS STONE chef
“When you roll up to her studios, you walk through this incredible building with photos of celebrities – Oprah and Nelson Mandela, President Clinton – and I wondered, ‘What am I doing here?’ But she is approachable and cool. I respect that she has been honest about her battles with her weight; it takes real character and everybody can relate. The interesting thing is, she is a real foodie. She celebrates food and cooking.”



PETER WALSH organisational expert
“We went to work with a family who had lost a child. They had been unable to move on and I helped them deal with that. And in the studio during a commercial, I said to Oprah, ‘This is so wonderful we can do this’ and she looked at me and said, ‘Why else would I have all this?’ It was the single most incredible moment I have had in talking with her. One of the things Oprah and her staff talk about is ‘intention’ and her intention is very clear: to use the power of broadcast to affect people’s lives.”

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