

Denzel Washington: A screen star with a Horatio Alger story

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Denzel Washington started out life trying to be the best he could be and give the most back. Fame hasn't pulled him off course. (Jacquelyn Martin/AP)

Home from college for the summer and on his way to the local Boys Club, Lowes Moore shouted out a greeting to an old friend he saw walking the streets of Mount Vernon, N.Y.

At the time, in the late 1970s, Moore was on his way to becoming a basketball star at West Virginia University. But his friend Denzel Washington, who had decided to pursue an acting career at Fordham after switching from pre-med, wasn't so certain of his career path.

"And we have this long conversation, and he says, 'I don't know if I made the right choice. Because I'm not having any success,'" recalls Moore. "And I said, when I feel like that, I just gotta clear my mind. I said, you oughta come on down to the Boys Club, and we'll work out, shoot some hoops. And we got on the court, playing the little kids. I was on one team and he was on the other.

"And after it was over, he said, 'You know, I feel so much better!' And it wasn't too long after that that he picked up 'A Soldier's Story,' " a 1984 film that helped put Washington on the map. "And from there, it just kept going."

That's a very understated way of summing up Washington's career, which has made him one of Hollywood's most prominent leading men at age 54, an Academy Award-winning actor and director who is one of the industry's authentic megastars. His latest star turn comes in a remake of the thriller "The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3," which opened in Washington this weekend.

The basketball anecdote is particularly appropriate because it suggests the importance of the Boys and Girls Clubs — for which Washington has served as national spokesman and fundraiser — to his success.

Washington has never been embarrassed about discussing his humble beginnings in Mount Vernon, spending hours at the Boys Club and working at a local barbershop and trying to take every opportunity to better his circumstances.

Those humble beginnings, and Washington's response to them, prompted his induction, earlier this year, into the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, a Washington, D.C.-based group that honors people who have become successful despite adversity or modest backgrounds. The diverse membership includes Oprah Winfrey, musician Quincy Jones, former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, former Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., commentator Paul Harvey and boxer George Foreman, to name just a few.

"Denzel holds those qualities that the association looks for — determination and perseverance," says Carrie Blewitt, a spokeswoman for the group. During Washington's April acceptance speech at Constitution Hall here, he even touched on his onetime career dilemma, reminding his audience, "Do what you love — not just what you were taught to do."

In "Pelham 1 2 3," Washington plays a role that draws on his hardworking past. He's cast as subway dispatcher Walter Garber, an anonymous employee who is thrust into the role of hero when a criminal played by John Travolta takes passengers aboard a New York City commuter train hostage. Or, as Washington recently described Garber to Reuters, "an ordinary guy in an extraordinary situation."

The role of ordinary guy came naturally to a man from Washington's background. Lowes Moore, who went on to an NBA career before returning to Mount Vernon to oversee the Boys Club, also fits the mold. So does Clinton Young Jr., another Boys Club alumnus who now serves as mayor of Mount Vernon, a suburb of just under 70,000 with a border that touches the Bronx.

Young, a couple of years Washington's senior, recalls him as someone who "always was a determined young man, very goal-oriented, even as a kid." He remembers Washington working hard to be named the Boys Club's "Boy of the Year," and notes that as a youngster, Washington was also once named Mount Vernon's police commissioner for a day.

"He's still the most popular police commissioner we've ever had," Young says with a laugh. "And the most successful."

In his 2006 book "A Hand To Guide Me," Washington recalled the tremendous influence of a Boys Club employee named Billy Thomas, whom he idolized to the point of copying his signature. "I just thought this guy was it, you know?" Washington wrote. "I'd catch myself trying to walk like Billy, trying to shoot a foul shot like Billy, trying to carry myself like Billy, trying to treat other people with the same respect and dignity he might offer."

"Everyone idolizes Billy Thomas," says Young, who notes that a street in Mount Vernon was named for Thomas earlier this year because of his work mentoring youth. "He's just that type of individual."

While the long hours his parents worked — his father was a Pentecostal minister, and his mother a beautician — made the Boys Club a crucial after-school option, Washington's family was hands-on in his upbringing. This was particularly true of his mother, who, Young says, insisted that her son be bussed to a better school on the city's north side during desegregation.

"Denzel's parents were Southerners," Young says. "And their impact on his life and views was enormous."

So after Washington's parents divorced, and his mother's fears of gangs, drugs and other temptations of the street were becoming too great, she enrolled him in Oakland Academy, a private prep school. Moore remembers a discussion he had with Washington around this time that illustrates his mother's no-nonsense attitude.

"His mother comes to the playground and says, 'Denzel, get in the car.' And he's trying to act like he's bad, which is hard when you're in high school and your mom's picking you up at the

playground. And he says something to her, and his mom whacks him. And he says, 'OK mom, drive the car. You've embarrassed me enough,' " Moore says, laughing.

But while Washington left Mount Vernon for prep school, he's never been gone for good. Among his many philanthropic endeavors, which include scholarships in fields like medicine and engineering, he has continued to maintain a local presence. That involves more than just "popping his head into the pizza shop, without any fanfare," an occurrence Young has often witnessed. Washington helped create a million-dollar endowment for the Boys and Girls Club, and last year he donated \$100,000 when fall sports programs in the city were threatened by budget cuts.

"He knows that there's love for him here," Young says. "He is still ours."

Maintaining that local connection is not a qualification to be inducted into the Horatio Alger Association, Blewitt says, "but a lot of the members seem to have those ties. Part of being a great success story is knowing where you came from, right?"

While Washington may belong to Mount Vernon, anyone would probably like to be able to claim him, including members of both political parties. Washington supported the mayoral campaign of Young, a Democrat, and has said he would love to play Barack Obama when a biopic of the president is made. But his hardscrabble success story, his Christian faith, his family (four kids) and his April induction into the Horatio Alger Association — in which he was presented by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas — make some believe Washington could make an ideal conservative icon as well.

Moore understands the attraction. "He understands the value of his personal name, but the reality is, you must do what's right. Whatever's right is right, and what's wrong is wrong, and I don't think that comes down to a particular party. The goal of all Boys and Girls Club members is to be the best Americans they can be. To have a relationship with God, first, and take care of your family, and your community."

Besides, Moore notes, Washington would be the last person to propose himself as a political expert.

"When we're talking about resource development and other stuff like that," Moore notes with a laugh, "he always says to me, 'Man, I'm an actor!'"