

Pass It On®...

From Humble Dishwasher to Mega-star.

Without the help of an elderly waiter, Sidney Poitier might never have become the actor that he is.

Sydney Poitier, the charismatic actor with the smooth-toned voice and intense gaze, rose to stardom in the 1960s. Honored by the Screen Actors Guild, winner of an Academy Award and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Poitier became a household name. But he got his start as a dishwasher.

Born in Miami to Bahamian farmers who traveled yearly to sell produce, Poitier was a descendent of runaway slaves. As an infant, he was too sickly to travel back to the Bahamas, so his parents remained with him in Miami for three months. He returned with his family to Cat Island, where he helped with the farm until he moved back to Miami at age 15.

In those early years on the islands, Poitier saw his first motion picture. When he returned to the States, he was determined to become an actor, so he moved to New York City.

While working as a dishwasher, young Sydney auditioned for a role in a local theater. It didn't go well. Having little education, Sydney Poitier struggled to read his lines. Discouraged, he went back to work as a dishwasher. But an elderly Jewish waiter took a liking to ambitious Poitier and began reading with him every night. They studied the newspaper and worked on diction to improve Sydney's delivery.

Meanwhile, there was a war on, and perhaps feeling an obligation to his elderly mentor, Poitier lied about his age and enlisted in the Army. He was 16 at the time.

After his stint in the Army, where he mostly worked in psychiatric hospitals, Poitier was unable to find work and returned to washing dishes. But he never gave up his pursuit of acting. He landed a role with the same theater that had rejected him a few years earlier.

The time he had spent with his Jewish mentor had helped him read more smoothly and given him the confidence to keep trying. It also proved to him that

he could learn anything he put his mind to. Poitier dedicated several months to smoothing out his Bahamian accent, delivering lines with the right inflection, and learning the craft of connecting with audiences in an emotional way.

And then the breakthrough happened. Poitier was noticed for his powerful performances on the stage and cast alongside Tony Curtis in the film "The Defiant Ones," which landed eight Academy Awards.

Poitier's decades-long career as one of the most successful draws at the box office made him a household name. He won an Academy Award in 1964, added film directing to his resume and was granted an honorary knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II in 1974. He received the Presidential Medal of Honor in 2009. As President Joe Biden later wrote, "Sidney helped open the hearts of millions and changed the way America saw itself." And it happened because of his hard work — and someone who believed in him when he was a youth.

Mentor a Teenager... [PassItOn.com](https://passiton.com)

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