

Against the odds

Q&A with Executive Producer, Writer and Host Ellis Cose

Q. In this time of uncertainty and upheaval, what message does AGAINST THE ODDS bring to listeners?

The implicit message of AGAINST THE ODDS is timeless and yet one that it doesn't hurt to reinforce: that even the worst circumstances can be overcome – given the right attitude, some resources and some competent help. All of the people profiled in AGAINST THE ODDS have endured much more than most of us will ever face, yet they emerged as strong and whole human beings prepared to contribute to the world. There are lessons in that for all of us, particularly when times look bleak.

Q. What influenced you to move into radio after achieving national prominence as a writer and social commentator?

Even though I came up in print, I have been dabbling in radio for a number of years – doing occasional commentary for NPR and other things. I like the medium of radio; I am particularly taken with radio's intimacy and immediacy. I think it is very well suited for the kinds of stories we showcase in AGAINST THE ODDS.

Q. How did you choose the four subjects featured in the debut season of AGAINST THE ODDS?

Part of my mission as a journalist has always been to provide a voice for people who are not routinely sought out by the mass media. To that end, I stay in touch with an array of people who are not likely to pop up on the front pages of big city dailies. I put out the word that I was looking for people, from around the world, who had faced adversity and gone on to do something interesting. The people profiled in AGAINST THE ODDS emerged from that network of contacts.

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Q. What prompted you to develop a series that examines individuals' motivation to achieve after experiencing tragedy?

Everyone profiled in AGAINST THE ODDS has not experienced tragedy; some simply faced stiff challenges. As a kid who emerged from some pretty tough housing projects in Chicago, I have always been intrigued by issues of adversity and social mobility, with how some people manage to overcome difficult backgrounds or circumstances and how others are essentially defeated by them. For me, AGAINST THE ODDS is another way to explore a lifelong preoccupation.

Q. After producing this series, what do you think enables one person to excel after a horrible life experience while so many surrender to despair?

I never expected to find an easy or facile answer to that question. For me, it's a little like asking what is the magic of the chemistry that causes one person to be attracted to another. There is always an element in that that is indefinable. But what is clear is that people who triumph over adversity manage to develop an attitude of optimism that is not necessarily justified by circumstance. They train themselves to take advantage of whatever opportunities life presents; and they are not shy about asking for help.

Q. Out of the four very different stories examined in the series, which person touched you the most?

They all touched me very deeply in different ways; but I was particularly moved by Serge, the young man from Rwanda who personally experienced hell, and whose brother and father were murdered in the genocide, and yet who emerged as this gentle, confident human being wanting to make his country a better place. But, as I said, I was moved by all the lives I chronicled. I think everyone who hears it will be touched by the story of the two sisters who were abandoned by their parents, ended up in foster care, and yet found solace in their studies; or by the so-called untouchable children in India who were so excited to be in a school where they were treated with respect instead of being abused. And Walter, the former drug dealer who got himself into UCLA is just amazing. Everybody in the series, I believe, has a remarkable story to tell. Clearly, I hope listeners agree.

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