She didn’t create the talk-show format. But the compassion and intimacy she put into it have created a new way for us to talk to one another.

By DEBORAH TANNEN

The Sudanese-born supermodel Alek Wek stands poised and insouciant as the talk-show host, admiring her classic African features, cradles Wek’s cheek and says, “What a difference it would have made to my childhood if I had seen someone who looks like you on television.” The host is Oprah Winfrey, and she has been making that difference for millions of viewers, young and old, black and white, for nearly a dozen years.

Winfrey stands as a beacon, not only in the worlds of media and entertainment but also in the

AT AGE 4, SHE WAS ALREADY A VETERAN PUBLIC SPEAKER

larger realm of public discourse. At 44, she has a personal fortune estimated at more than half a billion dollars. She owns her own production company, which creates feature films, prime-time TV specials and home videos. An accomplished actress, she won an Academy Award nomination for her role in The Color Purple, and this fall will star in her own film production of Toni Morrison’s Beloved.

But it is through her talk show that her influence has been greatest. When Winfrey talks, her viewers—an estimated 14 million daily in the U.S. and millions more in 132 other countries—listen. Any book she chooses for her on-air book club becomes an instant best seller. When she established the “world’s largest piggy bank,” people all over the country contributed spare change to raise more than $1 million (matched by Oprah) to send disadvantaged kids to college. When she blurted that hearing about the threat of mad-cow disease “just stopped me cold from eating another burger!”, the perceived threat to the beef industry was enough to trigger a multi-million-dollar lawsuit (which she won).

Born in 1954 to unmarried parents, Winfrey was raised by her grandmother on a farm with no indoor plumbing in Kosciusko, Miss. By age 3 she was reading the Bible and reciting in church. At 6 she moved to her mother’s home in Milwaukee, Wis.; later, to her father’s in Nashville, Tenn. A lonely child, she found solace in books. When a seventh-grade teacher noticed the young girl reading during lunch, he got her a scholarship to a better school. Winfrey’s talent for public performance and spontaneity in answering questions helped her win beauty contests—and get her first taste of public attention.

“More than a great star, you are a 20th century political figure. Your good works have touched all of us.”

PHIL DONAHUE, when Oprah received an Emmy for Lifetime Achievement

Crowned Miss Fire Prevention in Nashville at 17, Winfrey visited a local radio station, where she was invited to read copy for a lark—and was hired to read news on the air. Two years later, while a sophomore at Tennessee State University, she was hired as Nashville’s first female and first black TV-news anchor. After graduation, she took an anchor position in Baltimore, Md., but lacked the detach-
When my book You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation was published, I was lucky enough to appear on both Donahue and Oprah—and to glimpse the difference between them. Winfrey related my book to her own life: she began by saying she had read the book and "saw myself over and over" in it. She then told one of my examples, adding, "I've done that a thousand times"—and illustrated it by describing herself and Stedman. (Like close friends, viewers know her "steady beau" by first name.)

Winfrey saw television's power to blend public and private; while it links strangers and conveys information over public airwaves, TV is most often viewed in the privacy of our homes. Like a family member, it sits down to meals with us and talks to us in the lonely afternoons. Grasping this paradox, Oprah exhorts viewers to improve their lives and the world. She makes people care because she cares. That is Winfrey's genius, and will be her legacy as the changes she has wrought in the talk show can continue to permeate our culture and shape our lives.

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