

Angela Bassett talks growing up in St. Petersburg on Nerdist



Angela Bassett arrives at the premiere of Focus Features' 'London Has Fallen' at ArLight Cinemas Cinerama Dome on March 1 in Hollywood, Calif. [Getty Images]

The actress, who famously embodied the outsized persona Tina Turner in an Academy Award-nominated performance for *What's Love Got to Do With It*, spent a good chunk of the show talking about her life growing up in St. Petersburg.

Here some excerpts from the interview.

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On going to school at Hamilton Disston School in Gulfport:

"Grew up, walked across the street hopped the fence went to school. You know it was easy then. But in 7th grade they started bussing. So, you know, you get on the bus and you going way across town with all kinds of folk you know, white flight.

I look back at my little yearbook and I'm like, 'You know? I remember her!' But you remember all these faces. It was only a 7th grade class when they bussed me across town... We were kids. We were lovely.

Now, we were having problems in high school. People bringing dogs and brass knuckles and all kinds of frightening things and the principals who were sergeants in armies were keeping people straight.

On her role models:

We were like, 'I don't want to fight.' But it was interesting. And so I was involved in an enrichment summer weekend program called Upward Bound at the local college there, Eckerd College, and there was a teacher, well, director, who came through one year and he saw something in me. You know when you have people who speak into your lives and it makes just a world of difference?

Because I grew up with a single mom. Like I said, she headed to New York and was a hospital aide. That's what she qualified to do. She hadn't gone to college herself. My Aunt Golden had. She was that one who every summer would take some courses, go back to school, then go back to work every summer until she just on and on and on until the doctorate degree.

So I had these, the one that's in there working hard getting a dollar out of 10 cent and this aunt sending us — the kids — her straight A's. They were just very inspirational women in my life.

On Upward Bound at Eckerd College:

It was like kids from the neighborhood, friends. We would party. We'd get to spend six weeks on the college campus away from mom. And it was nice. Sprinklers went on at like 12:15 a.m., but the party is over in your dorm. So there was a lot of mystery and intrigue and stealth across the campus. And climbing out of windows and that sort of thing. But you know, good fun, not too dangerous. Not trying to do anything that would change your life too radically when you've got dreams.

On her dreams:

Other than marrying one of the brothers from the Jackson 5? It was my mother's dream. 'You are going to college.' Because she hadn't. She'd always made C's and D's so she was constantly on my sister and I. And it was like, you come home and, 'Oh, let me have my compelling argument. It's not an A. It's not a B. It's a C. C is average mom.' She'd say, 'I don't have average kids.' So you used to sort of get a spanking but you kind of feel good about it. I'm not average. So that changes the way you perceive yourself. Don't settle for average or mediocrity. That's a heavy mantle to bear, but bear it you must. And she would sit you down for hours and hours and hours on that linoleum floor or at the fake wood kitchen table and you'd think, 'Lord, why did I not behave? This is going to be a five hour talking-to.'

On getting involved with theater:

I did a little theater in high school. Well, there was only one theater, St. Petersburg Little Theatre (now called St. Petersburg City Theatre). And I really wanted to go out for the Little play but that meant there were rehearsals every night, but my friends were over at Eckerd College, of course. I only had four lines in the play, but my mom didn't know that. My rehearsal was over pretty quickly and then it was back to classes.

On getting outside of St. Petersburg:

You just want to make your family proud. People invested. That teacher who was there in that Upward Bound program. I think he was in the Armed Forces. So he was just there for that one year and then he sent me to Washington. He chose me to go to Presidential Classroom for Young Americans.

It was first time I'm out of St. Pete — other than Winston-Salem, N.C. (where her Aunt Golden lived) — but to travel alone to D.C. and be in a room with kids from different countries and cultures. It was just exposure and he could have chose anyone. You come back to Florida and he's gone. I had maybe three more years of high school and then my mother gets a letter just at that appointed time when you're trying to decide what college to go to and he's like, 'Dear Ms. Bassett, tell Angela to apply to Yale, Harvard, etcetera.' I mean, he was on with his life. He was somewhere else. And he sent that letter on this yellow paper, just these seven colleges she should apply to. And it's like, 'Wow. Somebody is watching you. And speaking things into your life. And lots of them.' That's why I applied to Yale. And whoops, what? Up jumps spring, I got in."

Bassett graduated from Yale University and finished the school's prestigious drama program before landing her first roles in soap operas more than 30 years ago. She won recent acclaim for star turns on FX's American Horror Story and has had her name floated as a possible new Star Fleet captain for an upcoming CBS Star Trek series.

Bassett said she's open to all the opportunities that could come her way, save for the characters who just serve to move the plot along.