

Gene Hackman

Gene Hackman's life is a testament to rising above and reinventing in unfortunate circumstances, overcoming early setbacks, defying the critics, finding what you want to do and pursuing it with all you've got. Once you read his story, you will see how persistence is necessary on the road to success. He was born Eugene Alden Hackman, on January 30, 1930, in San Bernardino, California.

A child of a broken home, Gene ran away and was raised by his maternal grandmother in Danville, Illinois. Arrested for stealing candy and soda from a convenience store, Gene had become something of a problem, when at the age of 16 he decided to drop out of school and join the U.S. Marines (He lied about his age).

He served in China and the Pacific but left the service at the end of his third year to pursue a career in radio, a talent he had learned in the Marines. Upon his discharge, he enrolled at the University of Illinois to study Journalism, but left to go to New York and pursue his dream of doing radio. During the 1950s, Hackman studied at New York's School of Radio Technique and worked at several radio stations in the Midwest.

He attended a showing of "Streetcar Named Desire," starring Marlon Brando, and after exiting the theater, told his father that he wanted to be an actor. This became his lifelong dream and fueled his ambition. Gene moved back to California and enrolled as a student at the famous Pasadena Playhouse in Los Angeles.

While at the Pasadena Playhouse, Hackman and a classmate were voted "Least Likely to Succeed." The classmate was Dustin Hoffman. He failed out of the playhouse after 3 months and moved to New York to continue being a stage actor. He had received one of the lowest grades the Pasadena Playhouse school had ever given (1.3 out of 10).

Hackman headed to New York with the intention of proving them wrong in 1956. That same year, he married Faye Maltese, and together they had three children. After landing appearances on television shows and a small role in his first feature film, he had his first substantial movie role, in *Lilith*, starring Warren Beatty. This association led to Hackman's breakthrough performance in 1967's *Bonnie and Clyde*, for which he earned an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor, portraying Clyde's brother Buck Barrow.

In 1971, Gene finally scored a leading role, earning great reviews and an Oscar for Best Actor, as New York policeman Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle in *The French Connection*. In the 1970s, he racked up a string of memorable performances in hit films, including *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Scarecrow* (his favorite role) and *Superman*, in which he starred as the villainous Lex Luthor. He said, "If I start to become a star, I'll lose contact with the normal guys I play best."

The story is told that in 1974, he called Mel Brooks and asked if there was a role in the comedy *Young Frankenstein* available for him. Mel cast him as the inept blind peasant, Harold. Hackman adlibbed the now famous line, "I was gonna make, espresso!" It took several takes to get one without Mel laughing out loud in the background.

By the late 1970s, the filming schedule had exhausted Hackman, and he took a brief sabbatical from acting, returning in 1981 in Beatty's *Reds*. In the early 1980s, he made less successful film choices. His career was revived in the latter half of the decade, with *Hoosiers* (based on a true

story), *No Way Out*, starring Kevin Costner, and *Mississippi Burning*, for which he received his third Best Supporting Actor nomination.

His marriage to Faye ended in divorce in 1986. In the early 1990s, Hackman underwent surgery for heart problems, but he continued to work. He initially turned down the role of Sheriff Bill Daggett in Clint Eastwood's acclaimed Western *Unforgiven* because he thought little of Westerns. His performance though, finally garnered him an Oscar and Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actor.

Gene married Betsy Arakawa in December of 1991. In the latter 1990's Gene settled comfortably into a rhythm alternating between lead roles and high-profile supporting performances. His more recent films have showcased the broad range that he has displayed throughout his career, such as the corrupt lawyer in *The Firm*, the angry submarine commander in *Crimson Tide* (co-starring Denzel Washington), and Eastwood's *Absolute Power*.

In sharp contrast he starred in comedies such as *Get Shorty* and *The Birdcage*. In 2001, Hackman impressed everyone with his performances in three very different films: *Heist*, the war film *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums*, for which Hackman earned a third Golden Globe award.

He received the Cecile B. DeMille Award for "outstanding contribution to the entertainment field," at the 2003 Golden Globe Awards in January 2003. It was a fitting tribute to a man who has portrayed many varied characters for almost four decades. That same year he starred in the critically acclaimed *Runaway Jury* followed the next year with the light-hearted comedy *Welcome to Mooseport* co-starring Ray Romano.

Gene often says he wants to quit acting in films, but that every time he has time off away from the set, he starts to miss it and wants to start another film. He revealed on Larry King's television show in 2004 that he had no movies lined up. When asked why, Hackman replied by saying that he thinks it is the end of his career.

End or not his career has shown what you can do when you set goals in life and put everything you have toward meeting them. He has made a career as a successful character actor whose uncommon abilities and smart choices ultimately made him a leading man. Gene Hackman's life shows that persistence and self-reinvention does indeed pay off.

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