

Born to be a mum, A-list celebrity and Hollywood star, Charlize Theron has put her sometimes difficult life experiences to good effect by founding a charity in Africa promoting the awareness of HIV and aids. And in 2012, after a two year process, she adopted her son Jackson, which finally allowed her to fulfil her dreams of having a family she could call her very own

AFRICA, AWARDS & ADOPTION

Charlize Theron's life story makes for extraordinary reading. Her unconventional childhood in South Africa, together with the death of her father at the hands of her mother and the loss of her chosen career as a dancer through injury are a far cry from the celebrity status she now enjoys as one of Hollywood's most successful actresses.

Charlize's rise to success against this difficult backdrop and her refusal to be defined by the tragedy and grief that characterized her early life mark out her tenacity and determination to live life to the full. Charlize's Hollywood success against the odds, her charitable activism and her decision to adopt in 2012 as a solo mother following the breakdown of her long-term relationship are proof that fortitude, passion and hard work can make dreams come true.

★ Early years

Charlize's childhood was spent in South Africa, the daughter of a German mother and an alcoholic father. She grew up on a working farm outside of Johannesburg speaking Afrikaans. From an early age, Charlize demonstrated a passion for dance and aged 13 her parents sent her to boarding school and she began her studies at the National School of the Arts in Johannesburg.

Aged 15, Charlize witnessed her father physically attack her mother and threaten both her mother and herself while drunk.

Her mother shot dead her father in front of her, which was legally determined to be self-defence and her mother was not prosecuted.

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Charlize struggled to come to terms with the death of her father and she created a long-standing story that her father had instead died in a car crash. The loss of a parent can be very difficult to deal with, but the circumstances of her father's death when she was just 15 were devastating and traumatic. Charlize later explained in an interview with webzine *IndieLondon* that "It was a way, at the time of explaining his death I didn't want to go in the reasons or the event itself. I have now come to terms with that and have been able to move on."

Family life as Charlize knew it disappeared forever when her father died. Charlize and her mother had to look to a different future together. Charlize later told *IndieLondon* "It made me realise that life deals you some really nasty cards and you just have to play them. I can remember thinking 'I want other cards than these'. I walked away from that experience, knowing that I had two clear choices. I either drowned - or started swimming, very fast. Things had been really bad between my father and me". Charlize and her mother stuck together and seized the first opportunity that came their way when Charlize was talent spotted by a modelling scout in Johannesburg the following year. It was a chance to escape their difficulties, travel and for Charlize to begin to make her own way in the world. »





Charlize's diversisty as an actress is evident in roles such as Snow White's stepmother, Queen Ravenna in *Snow White & the Huntsman*, as serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*, and as Meredith Vickers in Ridley Scott's science fiction film *Prometheus*



“Living in a country like South Africa where it was evident to me that violence against women and children was something that wasn't going to go away, and as a matter of fact has just gotten worse”

— Charlize on her campaigns to end violence against women and girls around the world

★ Move to America

After a period modelling across Europe, Charlize moved to New York aged 18 to focus on dancing with the Joffrey Ballet School. However a knee injury shattered her dreams of becoming a professional dancer. She later told *IndieLondon* 'All of a sudden I could no longer do the things that had been open to me for most of my life. I had been a flamenco dancer, too, so had an appreciation for all kinds of dancing. There is still a sorrow inside me about what happened and dancing remains a great love. I used to go to the New York City ballet by myself and cry. I know there is no possible way I can dance again at that level.'

Once again, Charlize had to re-evaluate life and she later said of this time 'I spent a winter in New York in a friend's windowless basement apartment. I was broke, I was taking class at the Joffrey Ballet, and my knees gave out. I realized I couldn't dance anymore, and I went into a major depression. My mom came over from South Africa and said 'Either you figure out what to do next or you come home, because you can sulk in South Africa.'

Following much soul-searching and the love and support of her mother, Charlize picked herself up again and moved to Los Angeles, where she decided to refocus her energies on becoming an actress. Cash-strapped Charlize then had a second lucky break when she was spotted by talent manager John Crosby following a run-in with a banker who refused to cash a cheque from her mother.

★ Hollywood Success

Charlize's career as an actress quickly snowballed and she went from a non-speaking part in the film *Children of the Corn III* (1995) to leading roles in box-office hits like *The Devil's Advocate* (1997) and *The Cider House Rules* (1999). Charlize then won critical acclaim

for her gritty portrayal of serial killer Aileen Wuornos in the film *Monster* (2003), for which she won the 2004 Academy Award for Best Actress, as well as a Golden Globe Award. Her Oscar win made her one of the highest paid actresses in Hollywood and webzine *AskMen* named her the number one most desirable women of 2003.

Charlize received further critical acclaim for her lead role in *North Country* (2005) for which she received Best Actress Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations and she went on to star in numerous films including Ridley Scott's science fiction film *Prometheus* (2012) and *Snow White & the Huntsman* (2012). Charlize is also set to take the lead role in the forthcoming film adaptation of the Gillian Flynn novel *Dark Places*.

★ Activism and social conscience

Charlize has always had a strong social conscience and sense of compassion which stem from her own life experiences. She began working with a South African rape crisis centre in 1999 and went on to found the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project which promotes HIV/Aids education for children and families in South Africa.

In 2008, Charlize became the United Nation's 10th peace envoy, following in the footsteps of US actors like George Clooney and Michael Douglas, to promote humanitarian work worldwide. She now campaigns to end violence against women and girls around the world saying of her work 'This is something that has been very dear to me, and disturbing to me for a long time, being born and raised in a country like South Africa, living in a country where it was evident to me that violence against women and children was something that wasn't going to go away, and as a matter of fact has just gotten worse' »

“I’ve always been very honest in saying I wanted a family. I’ve always known I wanted a family, I’ve always been very aware of balance and, even before I had a child, my life always takes priority to my work.”

★ Adoption and life as a solo mother

In 2012, after an intercountry adoption process that took two years Charlize finally adopted a son, Jackson, as a solo mother. This followed the end of her nine year relationship with Irish actor Stuart Townsend in 2010, although adoption had been a long-term objective of hers since childhood. Charlize told Australia’s *Madison* magazine that her mother found a letter she had written as a child saying “Would you please take me to [an] orphanage so that I can go and adopt a baby?”.

There has been a significant decline in the global number of intercountry adoptions since its peak in 2004. In 2004, approximately 45,000 intercountry adoptions took place but by 2010 the global total had fallen to under 30,000, partly attributed to a decline in eligible children following social and economic changes in countries like China, Russia and Guatemala and also work by developing nations to implement tougher domestic adoption regulations to retain children. Charlize’s decision to adopt a little boy from South Africa rather than create her family by other means publicly endorses intercountry adoption and the vital role adoption can play in giving opportunity and life chances to vulnerable children in need around the world.

Charlize’s decision to adopt as a solo mother was also the product of her decision to prioritise having a family rather than waiting to find Mr Right. In an interview with *Vogue*, she said “I’ve always been very honest in saying I wanted a family. I’ve always known I wanted a family”. Charlize’s experiences as a mother have enriched her life and ensured that her work/life balance is firmly rooted in favour of her personal life saying “...Jackson is great. I’ve always been very aware of balance and, even before I had a child, my life always takes priority to my work”.

Like Charlize, increasing numbers of single women are taking the decision to become solo mothers rather than hold out for their perfect life partner. The decision to start a family is always a big one, but it raises additional challenges for solo parents who carry the sole burden of parenthood. Solo parents must take extra care to ensure they legally secure their family unit, especially if they become parents through adoption or conception with a known donor, and ensure they put in place a valid Will to appoint legal guardians for their child and secure their child’s financial future in the event of their unexpected death.

Charlize Theron’s commitment to live life to the full is impressive. Her passion for her work, her personal life and family and the welfare of others marks her out as an exceptional woman and role model who strives to make the world a better place for us all.

CHARLIZE THERON AFRICA OUTREACH PROJECT



CTAOP was created in 2007 by Charlize Theron in an effort to support African youth in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Although the geographic scope of CTAOP is Sub-Saharan Africa, the primary area of focus has been Charlize’s home country of South Africa.

In collaboration with Oprah’s Angel Network, CTAOP provide funding to Mpilonhle, a community based South African non-profit organisation that offers mobile health services to secondary schools in the rural uMkhanyakude District of the KwaZulu-Natal Province, one of the most impoverished regions of South Africa.

Mpilonhle provides HIV/AIDS preventive education, health screening, counselling, psychosocial support, voluntary HIV testing as well as home-based care and treatment for those who are infected. Other programs include peer counselling, computer literacy courses, food parcel distribution, and a sports and health curriculum. To date, Mpilonhle has supplied services to over 60,000 students, including more than 30,000 who have had individual health counselling sessions.

With the general lack of roads, electricity, schools, hospitals and health clinics, as well as a lack of portable water and sanitation services, CTAOP have helped Mpilonhle to embark on a more holistic approach to address the broader needs of the community in ways which have only worked to enhance their HIV prevention work.

In early 2011, construction began on a collaborative community initiative called Home Field Advantage (HFA) which aims to bring clean water, sports fields, food gardens, community laundry basins, and non-contaminating toilet blocks to secondary schools.

The generosity of CTAOP’s supporters, including the Annenberg Foundation, ONEXONE, Orange County Center for Living Peace, Red Granite Pictures and many others, enabled Mpilonhle to create hubs of activity at these schools that will allow their health services to reach beyond enrolled students to the community at large. To find out more about CTAOP and how you can get involved please visit our website.

www.CharlizeAfricaOutreach.org



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