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Cover Stars

Sofia Carson Is Fighting for Girls Everywhere

The actor is part of Teen Vogue's Young Hollywood Class of 2020.

BY **PRIYANKA CHOPRA JONAS**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RUTH OSSAI**

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global brand ambassador. Sofia makes doing it all look so easy.

The 26-year-old hasn't taken any of her blessings for granted, including something a little less glitzy than Hollywood: education. After moving to Los Angeles as a teenager, she balanced a hectic schedule of classes at UCLA and auditioning. While she's found success in show business, her dedication to education has remained constant through her work with **UNICEF** as an ambassador. Speaking with Priyanka Chopra Jonas, who also partners with the organization on humanitarian initiatives, Sofia opened up about the motivation behind her philanthropy, the first time she landed a role, reflections in the mirror, and more. — Gabe Bergado

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Priyanka Chopra Jonas: I'm going to kick-start this with your UNICEF work. I was looking at pictures from your recent trip and hearing you speak at the **Snowflake Ball** with intention, I could tell it meant a lot to you. How did you get into that work?

Sofia Carson: It all goes back to my mom, the most incredible woman I've ever known. She's always taught me and my sister, Who are we if we don't give? Part of my family's from Colombia. So I grew up traveling to Colombia every year and seeing the incredible amount of necessity in the country. When I was 12, my mom took my sister and me to a shelter that took in battered young women. We met a girl whose name was Maria — she was 11 years old and she had just given birth to her stepfather's child. We realized that no matter what we did for the rest of our lives, we have a duty to this girl, and to the world, to give.

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Not only do I get to wake up every single day and do what I love, but I have this incredible, remarkable, powerful platform. UNICEF was always an organization I had grown up admiring so deeply. It has been the greatest honor of my life to work with them over this last year and to do everything I can to help in their fight to protect the rights of children. It always goes back to helping and educating young women. When women are educated, societies thrive.

PCJ: I grew up in a very philanthropic background, but I kind of realized that like Spider-Man says, "With great power comes great responsibility." There's something extremely powerful about people who use that to the benefit of others. You're from Miami, isn't it? What were your earliest childhood memories of that place?

SC: Miami is such a melting pot. Every single one of my friends was from a different part of the world. Their parents were from different parts of the world. So I grew up in this bubble within the United States that was so international, so global and social, with so many cultures and languages. I'm really grateful for that experience. Growing up bicultural has been a big part of who I am; it framed how I see the world. I didn't realize that that wasn't the normal until I left.

PCJ: When did you know you wanted to move into entertainment?

SC: I was like two and a half, and I was like, "This is what I have to do for the rest of my life. "I was lucky that I always knew. There are videos of me and my sister, I was probably three years old, singing "Don't Cry For Me Argentina" from *Evita*. Whether I was singing, or putting on a show or acting, I always wanted to somehow tell a story. Music was my first love, though. My parents from day one, were everything. My unconditional, undoubted support, and I felt that I could do anything that I set my mind to.

PCJ: When was the first time you performed in front of people?

SC: I first got into dance class when I was three. We had our dance recitals, and my earliest memory of properly performing, I was eight and we put on *The Wizard of Oz*. I played Dorothy and I remember being on that stage and felt safe. Like I was home in some weird way.

PCJ: Because you were meant to do that.

SC: Yeah. I never really fit in, in my day-to-day life. I never really wanted to have too many friends. I was always kind of a nerd, so I was bullied quite a lot growing up. If I wasn't studying, I was in dance rehearsals or writing a song.

PCJ: When did it become professional?

SC: I was 22, four years ago. I moved to Los Angeles to go to UCLA. Education has always been a huge part of my life and for my parents. It was always the deal that they supported me unconditionally, however, I had to go to school and pursue my education. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to even go to college. I moved to LA myself and I was auditioning while I was in school. After class, I would run and audition once or twice a day. Or since I would often miss class, I would email my professor and be like, "I have this big audition. I'll make up all my studies," et cetera. But they were always really understanding. I went on about 200 auditions before I got my first job. It was a small guest-starring role on a Disney Channel series called *Austin & Ally*. I remember when I got the email saying that I got the job, at the very bottom it said like, "And this is what you're going to be paid," and I was

like, "Ah, I get paid to do this?"

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PCJ: I've always been super curious: What's the audition process for Disney?

SC: I was auditioning for [the] Disney Channel as well as other series at the same time. I think I had a different experience; I was 21. A lot of kids that start at Disney sometimes start when they're 13, 12, even younger. I had a very different experience in general because I was a grown woman.

PCJ: How was it first filming the *Descendants*?

SC: That was the moment where my life changed completely. I had never really acted before. My only job before that was that guest starring role on *Austin & Ally*. It was a little scary going into a project like *Descendants* with Kenny Ortega directing, Kristin Chenoweth, Kathy Najimy. Even my costars: Booboo Stewart had been in *Twilight*; Dove who had her series on the channel for forever; my dear Cameron who has had the most incredible career. The first day on set we were shooting the opening number "Rotten to the Core." My mom flew in and I remember having the biggest case of butterflies in my stomach, but it was magical. As much as the movie is a fairy tale, even shooting it felt like a fairy tale. To be a part of something with The Walt Disney Company where I get to play the daughter of a heritage character — to play like a real-life Disney princess, it was so surreal.

PCJ: Every little girl's dream.

SC: I realized as I was playing Evie that her story was so much more than just being a princess. She's the daughter of the Evil Queen from *Snow White* who was the most vain woman in the world. She defines her daughter by her beauty. Being in this business, you and I know more than anyone else how much beauty is used to define us as women. Evie's story was aimed toward little girls around the world to tell them that you are so much more than a pretty face, that you are not defined by any reflection in the mirror nor any glass ceiling. Evie's story became this triumph of girl power.

PCJ: What comes more naturally to you, music or acting?

SC: Instinctually, I would say music, but probably because I've done it for the majority of my life. I know where my limits are with music; I know my instrument. When I first started acting, it was terrifying because I didn't know what to do. The more roles I've played, I've fallen in love with it and trusting those instincts. We have a responsibility to the character on that page to tell her story and to do it justice. When you get to fully step into their shoes, it's the most incredible rush.

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PCJ: In your wildest dreams, what does your career look like to you in the future?

SC: Right now my priority is really doing everything that I can to use my voice and this platform, continue my work with UNICEF to the best of my ability. I really do feel that I have a responsibility to the young girls that I'm lucky enough to have any sort of influence on.

The role I take on next in whatever movies or series that I'm lucky enough to be a part of, [I hope] is informed by working with female directors, the Greta Gerwigs of the world. Growing up I would sit in front of my TV and watch Cher's world tour, Barbra Streisand, because they were women who did it all. They had careers, they're Oscar nominees, Grammy winners, philanthropists. In terms of music, one dream that I have left to fulfill is [to] go on a world tour with my own music.

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