

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

A Voice for Change

Activist and actor **Olivia Munn** credits her success to education, hard work and the tenacity to overcome turmoil.

Standing at a podium with the inaugural Voice for Justice Award gleaming before her, actress **Olivia Munn** looks over an audience of 200 guests and offers a wry smile.

“Out of everyone I’ve met at the university, I never would have guessed that I would be getting an award from OU.”

Others may have seen it coming. The 2004 alumna’s wit, willpower and gritty work ethic led her from the sidelines of Owen Field to star-making roles in television and films ranging from “The Daily Show” to “X-Men: Apocalypse.” In recent months, she has emerged victorious on the front lines of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements after enduring more than a decade of slander from a prominent Hollywood director.

“No big change in this world ever happened without turmoil,” Munn told the audience at the University of Oklahoma Department of Women’s and Gender

Olivia Munn as “Psylocke” in the 2016 superhero film, “X-Men: Apocalypse.” True to her lifelong work ethic, Munn trained for months in taekwondo and did all her own fight scenes for the film.



Alan Markfield



Munn's Chinese family fled Vietnam in the final days of the war and took refuge in Oklahoma City, where she was born. "Oklahoma has been a safe haven for my family and is, in every sense of the word, home for me," Munn says.

Studies *Voices for Change* award ceremony in April. "And that's exactly what's happening in the world right now."

Though widely known as a comedian, Munn is not a stranger to turmoil. Munn's mother, Kimberly Schmid, fled Vietnam with her Chinese mother and eight siblings in the last days of the Vietnam War in 1975. They were given refuge

“My favorite sound in the world is that bass drum at a college football game. There's nothing like a college football game, and especially OU.”

in Oklahoma City, where Munn was born and an extended network of family still lives today.

"Oklahoma has been a safe haven for my family for a long time and it is, in every sense of the word, home for me," Munn says during an on-campus interview with *Sooner Magazine* and the OU Alumni Association. "Oklahoma is very special to me."

Munn's former stepfather was in the U.S. Air Force and much of her childhood was spent hoscotchting between posts. She first explored acting and modeling during eight years in Japan; by the time the family returned home Munn was a junior at Putnam City North High School and certain that acting was her future.

"That was a big culture shock, to go from Japan to Oklahoma," she says. "I didn't know anybody and I had a hard time in the beginning fitting in. My sister, Sara, was starting her freshman year at OU, and she would drive the 45 minutes

every day to have lunch with me so I wouldn't have to sit alone.

"Eventually, I got my footing," says Munn, who was drawn to classmates others labeled as geeks. When high school ended Munn begged her mother to let her move to Los Angeles and pursue acting. But coming from a family in which nine refugee siblings had earned college degrees in fields like medicine and engineering made her mom a hard sell.

"I always wanted to be an actress, but my mother didn't think you could make money – she's wrong," quips Munn, who currently stars in the summer blockbuster "The Predator" and as a CIA operative in the History Channel series "Six." "But I loved being a storyteller, and the next-best thing to acting would be journalism because you were still able to tell stories."

She and her mother reached a compromise: Munn would earn her degree at OU and work as a journalist for one year. Her secret strategy was to get through school quickly and to gain as much real-world experience as possible.

Soon, Munn was applying for a sportswriter position at *The Oklahoma Daily* student newspaper because she realized female sports reporters were few and far between. "I wasn't even into sports, I just needed a way to make a career," she admits. "I thought, 'Something will get me to L.A., then I'll figure it out from there.'"

Writing for the *Daily* "really was the launching pad for me," says Munn, now 37. She covered OU football during a period when the Sooners won the 2000 national championship, had

consecutive wins at the Cotton Bowl and the Rose Bowl, and appeared in the 2004 national championship. "Because of all that, we had 'College Game Day' coming to OU and I was able to meet people and get connections to apply for internships with ESPN and FOX."

Munn's resolve to reach L.A. cultivated an astonishing work ethic. "While I was here I took a full course load every year," she says. "My last semester I took 21 hours plus two internships. The semester before that was 18 hours, plus two internships, writing for the *Daily* and for *Sooners Illustrated*."

What little free time Munn had was spent with her best friend, Cara McConnell, '04 Architecture, who now practices in L.A. and joined Munn and her family during their recent return to OU. "We would scrounge up whatever change we had, get in the car and go to Classic '50s," says the actress, whose eyes light up when she hears that the local drive-in is



OU Women's and Gender Studies Board of Advocates member Linda Scoggins presents the Voice for Justice Award to Munn for her advocacy and courage after emerging as a leader of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements.

still in business. "They had great ice there."

Among the friends' most vivid college memories are home game days when Munn was on assignment and had a sole sideline pass. "I would tell Cara, 'Just act like you know what you're doing and they won't question it.' I got her onto the sidelines for almost every game," she confesses with a touch of unabashed glee.

Saturdays on Owen Field left their imprint. "Sometimes," Munn says, "interviewers ask me, 'What's your favorite sound?' My favorite sound in the world is that bass drum at a college football game. There's nothing like a college football game, and especially OU."

After graduation, she went to work at KJRH-TV, Tulsa's NBC affiliate. Munn made the move to L.A. one year and one kept promise later as a basketball reporter for FOX Sports, with off hours devoted to acting classes and auditions. During her first two years in Hollywood she made brief appearances in low-budget horror and buddy picture films before landing a repeating role on the Nickelodeon TV surfer series, "Beyond the Break."

Then came "Attack of the Show," a live, daily pop culture and technology program on the G4 network that unleashed

Munn's cheeky humor, improv skills and willingness to lampoon her looks while confronting stereotypes about intelligent women. The combination earned Munn the title of "America's Favorite Girl Geek" from *L.A. Weekly*. She spent four years at G4, lured away in 2010 when Comedy Network's "The Daily Show" hired her as their tongue-in-cheek "Asian Correspondent."

"I took an 80 percent pay cut, because nothing's better than Jon Stewart thinking you're funny," Munn once told *Self* magazine about the move.

She published a collection of autobiographical essays that same year. Most were humor, but one story bluntly recalled visiting a film set as a 22-year-old novice, only to have the prominent young director ambush her with a shocking act of sexual misconduct. Munn chose not to pursue criminal charges on the advice of an attorney.

The perpetrator was not named in Munn's book, yet director Brett Ratner identified himself during a television appearance and claimed that he had dated her; in fact, they had never met previously. He recanted during a radio appearance days later, but changed his story multiple times and verbally assaulted Munn with sexually explicit lan-

guage when they crossed paths at an industry event.

Ratner's lies followed Munn for more than a decade. "Of course, I had to go through the stigma that women have to deal with in this world in every profession, which is that people think we will use our sexuality to get ahead. The public wanted to believe it for some reason even after he'd admitted that he lied," she says evenly. "Two years later he got a huge, \$450 million financing deal from Warner Bros."

She pushed past the rumors and focused on work, earning spots in such films as "Iron Man 2." Munn also had five TV offers in hand, but her sights were set on the forthcoming HBO drama "The Newsroom," created and written by contemporary legend Aaron Sorkin. "I knew that if I held out for Sorkin, my life could change," she told *Self Magazine*.

"I'd seen her on 'The Daily Show,' so I knew she was a world-class comedian," Sorkin said to *Ocean Drive* magazine. "But it wasn't until her audition that I saw she was also a world-class actress." Munn played brilliant, socially stunted economist and financial reporter Sloan Sabbith throughout the series' 2012-2014 run. She was named *Variety's* Breakthrough Actress in the show's final season.

Munn says her work ethic and an unflinching critical eye led to success. "You can't sit around and ask, 'Why me?' You have to keep your head down, work as hard as you can, learn as much as you can, say thank you as much as possible and then hope that all the stars line up above your head at the same time."

Though "The Newsroom" provides the most tangible example, Munn says she has put her OU journalism degree to work at every career turn. "I'm so inquisitive, I think I ask more questions than most people," she says eagerly. "I get to know many people just by asking questions. I do that with all of my roles, as well. I ask a lot of questions of the writer and director because these aren't my characters yet; they created them. It's a better way, I think, to live life – by learning from others."

"The thing about journalism that I think is so important," Munn reflects, "is it's about telling other people's stories and using the media to shine lights on issues and people who really need the attention."

When the seismic wave of the #MeToo movement erupted across Hollywood last fall, Munn chose to open herself to further criticism by shining a light on her experiences. She was already writing a first-person account for *The New Yorker* when the *Los Angeles Times* told her that five other women had accused Brett Ratner – now among Hollywood's most powerful producers and directors – of sexual harassment, misconduct and assault.

"I knew that I had to lend my voice to this group because it was important that we had solidarity and they knew I was there with them," Munn says. She told the *Los Angeles Times*, "It feels as if I keep going up against the same bully at school who just won't quit. I shouldn't have to be completely broken, battered and devalued in order to prove that he crossed a line."

Repercussions finally came to Ratner. Within days of the article's publication, Warner Bros. refused to renew its \$450 million deal and asked him to vacate office space on the com-



Courtesy Twentieth Century Fox

Munn knew she was meant to be an actress by the time she was a junior at Oklahoma City's Putnam City North High School. She stars as evolutionary biologist Dr. Casey Brackett in this summer's blockbuster, "The Predator."

pany's studio lot. Ratner also was removed as producer for "The Goldfinch."

But Munn lent more than her voice to rousing awareness and action. On Jan. 1, she was one of 300 women in the entertainment industry pledging her financial and moral support to the Time's Up initiative, which provides a legal defense fund to help underprivileged victims of sexual harassment, promotes legislation against companies that tolerate persistent harassment, and addresses the power imbalance in Hollywood.




Melissa Moseley / HBO

“I knew she was a world-class comedian, but it wasn’t until her audition that I saw she was also a world-class actress,” Aaron Sorkin says of Munn’s work on his critically acclaimed HBO drama, “The Newsroom.”

Back at the podium receiving OU’s Voice for Justice Award in recognition of her courage and advocacy, Munn shares what the past 14 years have taught her. “This is not just a women’s issue – it’s an abuse of power issue,” she says. “This movement would not happen with just one voice. This honor means so much to me, but I cannot accept it on my own. I do accept it on behalf of all the women, all the silence-breakers who came forward to lend their voice to making this change.

“To me, this is an amazing time in the world. It seems so

dark when you hear that these things have happened. But as someone who has spoken up and has had to deal with the repercussions, am still dealing with it, I can tell everyone here that it’s not sad at all.

“The world is changing,” Munn beams at an audience overflowing with family, friends and fellow OU alumni. “And I am so grateful to have a chance to be at the forefront of that.” 

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