



He may have an Oscar, but Matt Damon's focus includes philanthropy as well as film.

Written by
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Water relief from a star

WATER PHOTO COURTESY OF WATER.ORG; DAMON PHOTO BY CHRIS PIZZELLO/AP IMAGES

“The whole way into this thing was about people who collaborate and cooperate to make something bigger than they are, and that’s kind of what we all spend our lives doing...I do understand that feeling of wanting to build something with my friends.”

Dressed all in black, Matt Damon looks at his audience as they applaud his comment. He stands humbly onstage with others, discussing one of his latest projects with an enormous screen glowing behind his head.

If you didn’t know any better, you’d say he was presenting at a panel at the Davos World Economic Forum, announcing a new philanthropic initiative that will positively impact a cause he is passionate about.

In reality, Damon stands in a darkened movie theater at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) after the premiere of his new film, *Ford v Ferrari*. Flanked by his co-stars and director James Mangold, Damon speaks about how he managed what the moderator hailed as an incredible performance.

I was left to wonder if Damon is aware how his answer can apply to more than just his film career.

Before he became a full-time actor, Damon briefly attended Harvard University before dropping out and making his film debut in *Mystic Pizza*, which was released in 1988. He accepted roles where he could for almost 10 years before writing the screenplay for *Good Will Hunting* with his childhood friend and

fellow actor Ben Affleck. The film was Damon’s golden ticket: He and Affleck won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. The pair were so elated—and shocked—at their win that during their acceptance speech, they could barely get out full sentences, eventually just yelling out the names of those they wanted to thank.

At just 27 years old, Damon was securely established in the eyes of Hollywood. He began appearing in everything from realistic historical movies like Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* to cult films like Kevin Smith’s *Dogma*. The public has watched him evolve into a sought-after figure in Tinseltown.

But now, at 49 years old, Damon’s work in philanthropy is starting to look just as impressive as his film résumé.

Like many stars, Damon uses his celebrity status as a platform to promote causes he is passionate about. He has collaborated with hunger-relief organization Feeding America as part of its entertainment council and starred in several of its public service announcements, and has supported the ONE Campaign, an initiative that fights AIDS

and poverty in some of the world's poorest countries.

Damon's charity work is known to all. In the season six finale of *Entourage*, he portrays a satirical version of himself, pestering actors to give to charities and calling the main character, Adrian Grenier's Vince, to badger him about a donation to the ONEX-ONE Foundation, a charity Damon is, in reality, an ambassador for. (It supports, preserves, and improves the lives of vulnerable children around the world.)

Despite being shown as a passionate—albeit aggressive—fundraising promoter to other celebrities, Damon has worked with many of them for good causes. For example, he co-founded Not On Our Watch with actors George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Don Cheadle, film producer David Pressman, and politician Jerry Weintraub. The organization focuses on providing resources to help those displaced by mass tragedies around the world.

But for Damon, it comes down to water: He established the H2O Africa Foundation in 2006 to help solve the global water crisis after seeing how people around the world live without access to clean water and toilets.

"Access to water is access to education, access to work, access above all to the kind of future we want for our own families and all the members of our human family," Damon says.

While at the Clinton Global Initiative meeting in 2008, Damon met Gary White, an engineer and a recognized water and sanitation expert with his

own organization, WaterPartners International. The two joined forces in 2009 and merged their charities together to create Water.org, the foundation Damon now focuses much of his philanthropic efforts on.

"We have the potential to put this crisis behind us. And do it in our lifetime," White says.

Water.org concentrates on breaking the cycle of poverty by providing access to water and sanitation to the millions of people without it around the world, including those in Honduras, Kenya, Uganda, the Philippines, and India. According to the charity's website, 785 million people don't have safe water in their home, and 2 billion people don't have access to proper sanitation tools. Using market-based financing and working with partners, Water.org is helping families living in poverty raise themselves out of the cycle.

"Gary took the concepts pioneered by Muhammad Yunus and applied them to the water sector," explained Damon in an interview. "At the time, this was a bit of a thought leap for people because it wasn't an income-generating loan; it was an income-enhancing loan. Somebody who was working a job, who was living in this slum and not connected to the infrastructure, they would take time away from their job to go queue up and get water at an appointed time. So Gary said, 'Well, if we could buy them that time back and connect them directly, I bet they could pay this loan off.'"

This form of giving is done through Water.org's WaterCredit program. Instead of loaning funds to individuals, it provides local institutions subsidies that can reach \$200,000 a year. They monitor the loans they give out to families (the average is about

Christain Bale and Damon



PHOTO BY PHILLIP FARAONE/COURTESY OF TIFF

\$360) and Water.org verifies each one. Of the loans given, 99 percent of them are paid back, allowing for that capital to be reinvested as other loans that are improving lives around the world.

Water.org operates in three ways: It partners directly with institutions that serve the base of the economic pyramid; it expands partnerships to accelerate access; and it strengthens the environment for water and sanitation solutions at a systems level. Not only is its goal to reach 60 million people by 2022—as of September 2019, more than 22 million people have been positively impacted by its work—but it also aims to accomplish the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 6: to ensure universal availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation.

Damon doesn’t mess around when it comes to clean water. During the viral ALS Ice Bucket Chal-

lenge a few years ago, people recorded themselves dumping buckets of frigid water over their heads with the goal of raising money for the ALS Association. Participants could call on others to take the challenge, and it wasn’t long before celebrities got involved, including Damon, who was challenged by Affleck and Jimmy Kimmel.

Instead of following suit and using tap water as almost every challenger did, Damon’s two-minute video shows him using a bowl to scoop water out of a toilet into a bucket of ice, explaining how there are hundreds of millions of people without clean water or toilets. He even points out, for “those of you



PHOTO BY GEORGE PIMENTEL/COURTESY OF TIFF

like my wife, who think this is really disgusting,” that toilet water in the West is cleaner than the water most people in the developing world have access to. His unique twist on the challenge allowed him to bring awareness to the global problem and encourage people to become involved.

“For more information on the clean water crisis and sanitation crisis, please visit us at Water.org,” he manages to say before dousing himself in cold water as his wife giggles behind the camera.

Back at TIFF, I sit in the third row of the *Ford v Ferrari* press conference, staring at the assembled cast onstage. Damon is noticeably absent, prompting the moderator to ask the stars what it was like working with him.

Christian Bale wastes no time in calling his colleague a superb actor, but doesn't stop there.

“He's also one of the bloody most decent men I've ever come across,” he says, as if he still can't believe such a person exists in today's society. “He's so cooperative. He's absolutely in the school of you cooperate with each other, you don't compete against each other at all...The way he views everything, he has this bigger perspective.”

Damon's charitable endeavors demonstrate Bale's point: He values helping for the long haul instead of racing for the fast fix. Damon may have a shining career, but his work as a philanthropist gives him his glow.

How do you like them (philanthropic) apples? **LM**



The faces of those helped by Water.org



