This is up to date on KCUR 89.3. I'm Steve Kraske. If someone was to ask what's actor Geena Davis really like, one answer that she probably would agree with is very polite. In fact, she points out in her memoir that she almost died of politeness as a little girl. We'll find out how in just a few minutes. She also points out that the characters she played in the big screen, including Thelma in Thelma and Louise, helped Geena Davis transform into a self-described badass, which was a far cry from what she was as a little girl. Davis has made gender parity one of her life's missions, and she'll be in town to talk about that as a featured speaker at the March 21 induction ceremony for the Starr Women Hall of Fame. Geena Davis is the founder and chair of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in the Media, a role that has made her an industry leader in putting the spotlight on gender equity on screen. She's also the author of a memoir, Dying of Politeness, and yes, she's won not only one Oscar but two. She's a member of Mensa, and she's played the president of the United States on TV. Well, Geena Davis, welcome to Up to Date. What an honor to have you here on the show. Oh thank you, my pleasure. Absolutely, now we should probably end a suspense over how your politeness almost cost you your life as a little girl. This is a pretty funny but frightening story. It is. It is. So, when I was about eight, my folks and I went out to dinner with my great uncle Jack and great aunt Marion. Uncle Jack was driving us back to their house and he's 99 years old. It's dark, he's got these huge yellow glasses on, I guess for perfect glare or something, and we're going down a quiet little road winding back to our lane. And then, back and forth unfortunately there's no other cars coming, but my parents don't say anything. I'm sitting directly behind Uncle Jack, and my mom picks me up and puts me between them because maybe I'll get killed a little less if I'm in-between them. Next thing you know, he's veering into the other lane and now a car is coming still nobody says anything. My parents are stiff, you know, but don't say anything. and if the- We're gonna have we're going to have a head-on collision as at the last instant, Marion says "A little to the right, Jack." Here's the real- we were within inches of having a head on collision. Wow. Wow. It just shows my parents would have rather died and picked their child with them than perhaps risk offending the old man. You know, well, politeness held you back in some ways at least early on in your life how so?

I was raised to never have any needs. The worst thing you could do is require anything of someone else. Of course, that my parents were tremendous givers, that my dad fixed everybody's Earnest and Carr, and you know, they gave and gave, but accepting something from someone else was considered really rude. So, you know, I had this ingrained in me so much so that, this is a silly example, but when I started dating, it was horrific because I couldn't express anything I wanted. They'd say "What would you like to have for dinner?" Oh, I don't know. You know, you pick. And then, it bled into being in situations where I couldn't say no to whatever I didn't want to do, right? Well, you tell a story in your Memoir about deciding to do something about the strong currents of self-effacement that you were struggling with, so you signed up for a self-defense class, Geena, and at one point you faced off with a man in a huge, padded suit so that you could fight him as hard as you wanted without any fear of hurting him. At one point, the instructor had all the class members stand in line, and one by one, the padded man would walk towards you when you felt like he was going to invade your boundaries, you were to yell stop. Tell us what happened when he walked towards you. Right, when it- Well, when he started coming toward me, he ran into me because I, and I didn't know it until it happened that would happen to me, but I just couldn't decide what was the right time to say stop. And so, I mean they were so revealing to me. Yeah, where I was coming from, there's all this politeness, and yet your father collected of all things, antique axes, and he had 500 of them stored all over the house, even under the dining room table. Geena, what was that about? Well, so his dad lived in the shore, and he'd grown up in Vermont where, you know, you make your own build, your own house, chop your own wood and all that stuff. But he liked collecting antique tools, and became somehow obsessed with axes. So, anytime they went to a flea market or a yard sale or anything, he'd be looking for special- and then he ran out of places to put them, so they were under our beds, they were they were under the dining room table with the blades faced not toward your feet. So yeah, that's good. You weren't going to hurt yourself, and your mother grew all of the family's food in a little one-acre garden. Why was that so important to her? It was a cost-saving. Saying, you know, that both my folks grew up during the Depression, and they were both extremely poor as kids, both their families. It was a way to save money. I mean, my mom would- if the can of peas was, well this probably would have grown our peas, but let's say something or other was a few cents cheaper at the other grocery store, she'd drive there - Wow. - to get it. It was incredibly thrifty. You knew you were. I love to garden, sure. You knew you wanted to be in the movies from a very young age. What would you do early on in your life that suggested what your career would turn out to be? Well, I don't know what first convinced me that I wanted to be an actor, because I was three years old when I told my parents that, yes, what had I seen- I mean how did they even know that was a job, but it never, never wavered, despite the fact that I was very, very shy. I mean, we put on plays in my girlfriend's basement and forced her mother to watch. But other than that, like, I didn't join any drama club or anything. It was always like "I'm gonna go away and pursue acting. I'm not gonna do it here" Well, in part that was because you were so tall, right, and that was such a struggle for you as a young girl. Oh right, oh yeah. I was, I was the tallest kid in class, not just a tallest girl, all the way, all the way up. So yeah, I was very bothered by that, and my mother didn't allow slouching. She said "You're going to be tall again. Hold your shoulders back," so, so I didn't slouch, but I learned ways to like, you know, stand in certain ways where I shortened myself or sit a lot of times or that kind of thing. I tied my shoes a lot. But you also were raised to believe that you could do anything, and I think your dad helped a lot with that. He did, and that's the contradiction, that I was sort of fearless about doing things. You know, if he was going to shingle the roof, I was too, and he had me help him with her and my brother, of course, but I was always included in whatever he was working on. And he just behaved like I would know what to do, and knew what I was doing, and so I grew up with a tremendous confidence in my ability to things or accomplish things. Even though there were 10 axes under your bed, right? Well Geena, Geena Davis is a 2023 featured speaker at the Starr Women's Hall of Fame at UMKC. It'll take place at 4:00 on March 21st at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. You can get tickets through the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts box office. Geena, let me jump ahead here, because these days, you had the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in the Media. What does it do?

We research how female characters and under underrepresented members of the population are portrayed in film and television, with a special emphasis on what kids see first. We've- almost we're coming up on 20 years of doing this, and we've had some, some great success in influencing people to add more diversity to their, to their programming. Can you point to one of those successes? Like, how much of a difference has it made? Well, when we started out way back when, the average amount, percentage, of female characters in lead, as a lead characters, in movies made for kids was 11 and now it's 50. 50, wow. So, that was our goal, yeah. So, it's that, but you know, there's- there's plenty of work to do, and we're plugging away. You got the idea for this back in 2004, when you noticed there were a lot more boys than girls in the shows that your daughter watched. What did you do with that information? How did you how did the idea begin to take shape in your mind? Well, I didn't intend to, you know, make it into a whole thing, but I was so shocked to see that, that in little kids stuff there wouldn't be that balance. So, I just asked everybody in the business who I had a meeting with, I ran into, "Hey, have you ever noticed how few female characters there are and stuff made for kids?" and every single person said "No, no, no, that's not true anymore. That's been fixed," and often they'd say "We fixed it," and just had released a movie with one female character. So, I was like "Okay, this is utterly unconscious," so if I get the data and go to them privately, I don't have to educate the public. I could just go directly to the creators and say "Hey, did you know this?" and maybe they'll want to change. And they did. They were horrified. Everybody was just stunned that they were leaving out that many female characters. Interesting. You have said that progress has been made, Geena, in some ways, but not for all women. What do you mean by that? Well, you know, it- there's still very obvious things like the pay gap and the percentage of women in top professions, in almost every top profession, is only about 25. And look at our government, you know, and the fact that people keep saying "Will we have a female president in our lifetime?" I'm like, oh my God, what century are you living in? Of course, but that's not the point. Point one, the first one, the point is that it should be equally likely that the next president will be a woman or a man. That's where we have to, have to get to. I know in reading about you that you work closely with your own kids about not making assumptions about gender and gender roles. What types of things would you do with your kids?

Well, it was funny because I knew about this. I didn't limit what they could watch. I wanted them to see whatever their friends were seeing, but I would watch, and I could make the commentary that would educate them about it. So, I'd lean over and say "Hey, did you notice there's only boys in that, in that show? Why do you think that is?" or "Do you think girls could do what those boys are doing?" and "Why is she wearing that if she's gonna rescue somebody. That doesn't seem right." They became very, very savvy to the point where if I even started to lean over, they're "I know. I noticed, Mom. Not many girls there." Well, and your own career has been an example, too, hasn't it? Because you've been focused and direct this direction for a lot of years: Thelma and Louise, A League of Their Own. Just two examples. Right, right. Well yeah. Yeah, I'm- I was so fortunate that I got cast in both of those incredible roles, and the fact that they sort of live on is amazing. But once I saw how women reacted to Thelma and Louise, I realized that we give women so few opportunities to feel inspired and empowered by female characters. So, I would love to be able to choose roles that I think women might appreciate. Well, you clearly saw the potential in Thelma and Louise, because you lobbied director Ridley Scott for a role in that film. Really hard, Really hard. Yeah, and in fact, it was for a year, because when I read the script, somebody slipped me the script, and said "This is the best script." It turned out that it had already been cast, really was. By the producer, but somebody else was the director. Okay, no, oh no, oh no, but I had my agent call Ridley's office every week to say, you know, if anything happens - Jesus - and then that did fall apart, and they were going to recast it, and- but it turned out that the new director already had his Thelma and Louise in mind. So, that happened. It was three times there was a different set of Thelma and Louise, and then finally Ridley said "I'm just going to direct this myself," and so, he said yes. I will meet with Geena. She's been very persistent. And you actually were lobbying for the role that Susan Sarandon actually received? It's so weird. Well, I was meeting with my acting coach while I was cast with somebody else. I was like preparing for the movie, and he thought I should go for the more mature role. He said "You know, you're old enough now. I think you could play that part really well." So yes, I pitched to Ridley that I should be Louise, and very fervently of course, and Ridley said so in other words you wouldn't play Thelma, and then I very quickly- and I said "You know what, as I've been listening to myself talking about this I realized I should actually play Thelma," and then I just made a bunch of stuff up about why I absolutely had to be sober, so that's who I was so clearly. You saw something in that in that role, in that film, that you thought had all kinds of potential here. I really did. I mean, they were the two best female roles I'd ever seen, and that the movie was about them and their relationship, their friendship, not about them fighting over some guy or whatever. So yeah, I knew that it was, it was a very important movie. I didn't know the reaction that I would get. I had no thought at all about that, that it kind of explodes like it did you know. Given what we talked about earlier in our conversation about politeness and how that held you back a bit, I wasn't surprised to read that, that Susan Sarandon, who starred with you in Thelma and Louise, had what you have said was the biggest impact on your life of absolutely anybody. Why yeah, that's absolutely true. It was from the first moment I met her, we were going through the script with Ridley, just the three of us, and she was just saying what she thought on every page, you know. I don't, I don't think we need this first line here. Why don't we cut that one, and he said "Oh yeah," or they talk about it or whatever. I was like "Well, wait a minute. I've never seen anybody like this before. Literally I hadn't been in the presence, extended presence, of a woman who says what she thinks without qualifiers in front of it. I mean, everything I ever said was "I don't know if I should say," "this is probably a stupid idea," but well, there she was, and every day it was a lesson in "Oh my God, it's actually okay to say what you think and nobody hates you or gets mad at you. Everybody loves Susan." But you should say "I don't think we should do it this way. What if we do it this way?" or whatever. Oh my God, so yeah. I totally, I totally had a three-month lesson in how to move through the world that was utterly different from the way I had. You've said that in hindsight, you wish you could have worked even more, had been in even more films. There aren't many people out there who say they wish they would have worked more, but you feel that way. Oh yeah, absolutely, because you know, the more you act, the better you get, and you know, you get stronger and stronger as time goes on. And unfortunately, sometimes the roles don't happen in the same way for women, you know. The older you get, tends to be fewer roles. So, I love- I love acting. It's not like I wanted to work back to back. I'm very good at amusing myself when I'm off a job, but yeah. I would definitely- I wish definitely that I would have worked much more, but you know, it's really- I'm very picky, and it's really hard to find very good roles like in Thelma and Louise. How often does that come along? Yeah, I also was really struck in in reading about you, that in Tootsie, your first film, you were a little bit on the naive side when you first started out, and you thought that because you were in the cast that you had to be on the set every day for every shot, even if you weren't in it. When did it dawn on you that maybe you were a little bit off in your thinking there? Oh, after when I- when I shot something else later, I found out that you don't have to be there every day and- but it was so stupid, because I was too embarrassed to ask anybody. I mean, it was my first job. I could eat it and said "So what's- how does this work?" the day I went, and nobody ever said anything like "You know, Geena, you don't have to ask me." It was a great experience. Well, the 2023 induction ceremony for the Starr Women's Hall of Fame featuring Geena Davis will take place at 4:00 on March 21st at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. You can get tickets through the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts box office. Geena Davis, what a pleasure to have you on Up to Date, just been so much fun to talk to you, and we're looking forward to seeing you here in a few weeks.

Thank you. Great talking to you as well, thank you. All the best, Geena.