

Patricia Sheridan's Breakfast With ... IronE Singleton

Monday, January 16, 2012

By Patricia Sheridan, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



IronE Singleton.

He played a bad guy in the film "The Blind Side," but IronE Singleton is anything but bad. The actor grew up in Atlanta projects, where guns, drugs and hopelessness were pervasive. Yet he found his way out, graduating from the University of Georgia, where he played football with Steeler Hines Ward.

He plays T-Dog on AMC's hit "The Walking Dead," a zombie apocalypse series. Married with children, the 37-year-old is very spiritual and sees communication as a key to maintaining good relationships and solving problems. "The Walking Dead" returns to AMC Feb. 12.

What prompted you to change your name from Robert to IronE?

The thing that happened was my life [laughing]. IronE stands for an eagle in flight with an unbroken spirit. I coined that term because it is indicative of my life story and the fact that I'm out of the inner city. Statistics state that as a young black male from the inner city, I would be either in prison or dead or more than likely hanging out on a street corner selling drugs or something like that. So once I graduated from college, and right before I moved to LA, God just put it in my heart. There was this overwhelming desire to come up with a name that served as an ice-breaker. IronE was it.

So how did you find your way out of the projects and a situation so many see as hopeless?

Speaking metaphysically, there is just this overwhelming power, this supreme being in my life. It was bigger, way larger than life. I refer to it as God. I always had a relationship with God as early as 8 years old. I can remember having these conversations with God. I'd go in the bathroom and look in the mirror and talk to myself, but then I knew I was not the only one present.

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Speaking in worldly terms, I visited my paternal grandmother and saw that the life that she lived totally contrasted with the life that I had lived in the projects. So it inspired me to want more out of life. It made me more ambitious because before that I didn't know that anything else really existed except on the TV. ...

Other than your grandmother, did you use anyone else as a role model?

I used pretty much anybody I could. My coaches, my uncle (he was major). One of my uncles, who lived with us, was very instrumental in serving as an influence in my life. Whenever he had an opportunity, he would impart some wisdom. It was street wisdom, but it was the wisdom I needed at the time to survive. Even people who were living negatively, I would say, "OK, so this is how I should not do it." I would have to say everybody that God had in my life served a major purpose.

The underlying theme of "Walking Dead" is never give up, and it seems that is something you have always embraced in your life.

That is exactly it. You survive by any means necessary. There were a lot of moments in my life where I could have died or I could have ended up serving 20 years to life in prison. I overcame those things, those obstacles, because I listened and I obeyed that higher power that was speaking to me at the crucial moments in my life when it really counted. A lot of my friends didn't, and they ended up either going to prison and serving life terms or dying.

Do you think everyone has that other voice you are describing, but they just ignore it?

I think so. I think we, as human beings, have the inner voice. Some people may refer to it as a conscience. Some have done so much wrong in this life (and I can attest to it because I was in that category). When you've done so much wrong, there is so much dirt that is piled on your conscience it takes a lot for you to hear it. Over time I worked to get all that dirt, that negativity off my conscience to the point where it got louder and louder, and the messages became clearer and clearer. So yes, it exists in everybody. It is just a matter of whether we choose to obey.

Were you in trouble with the law growing up?

You know, I was never arrested. There were times I could have been in trouble with the law. I carried a gun -- I carried a pistol -- I sold drugs. ... They were survival instincts. I got a gun, for one, that was the thing to do in the inner city. It served as protection. If you didn't have a gun, more people would be prone to "try you."

For me, that was a thing I didn't have to worry about that much because there were a lot of men in my family. My grandmother was the matriarch. I was the youngest of all the men in my family, so I kind of used them as examples and kind of emulated what I saw them do. So I didn't have to deal with a lot of bullying because we had a lot of back-up, so to speak.

How much do you reach back into your own life when you are doing scenes in movies like "Blind Side" but particularly for "Walking Dead?"

All the time, Patricia. That part of my life weighs on me so heavily. You know it has such an influence on me. There are so many graphic images, so many things to pull from, so I use that as my motivation. I just look at where I used to be compared to where I am now, and I get overwhelmed with emotion.

Does it feel like you lived another lifetime?

Yes, yes, it was like a different world. I talk to my wife about it. We reflect on it, and it was like a different world, like it wasn't even a part of my life.

When you are doing a scene where you confront a racist, is your reaction instinctual, and it requires less acting?

[Laughing] For a lot of people it would maybe be more instinctive, but it's all acting. It is instinctive, too. That is part of the craft, but I have learned to take in the entire process of acting. So a combination of both and that is with anything, not just confronting a racist character.

So does your wife call you IronE, or does she call you Bob?

[Laughing] It depends on who we are around. When we are out in public, she says she tries her best to remember to call me IronE because that is what people know me as. But at home behind closed doors, she says "Singie" or she says "Rob" but most of the time "Singie." My last name is Singleton, so she says "Singie."

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First published on January 16, 2012 at 12:00 am

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