

Transcript:

On Sunday, over the statehouse in Columbia, S.C., the American flag flew at half-staff. Gov. Henry McMaster ordered the gesture in honor of someone he called, quote, "a truly extraordinary son of South Carolina," Chadwick Boseman.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

CHADWICK BOSEMAN: You know, I'm from Anderson, S.C.

CORNISH: The 43-year-old actor died Friday. He battled with colon cancer for the past four years. Boseman told NPR back in 2017 he remembered a different flag flying when he was a kid.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

BOSEMAN: I know what it is to ride in school and have Confederate flags flying from trucks in front of me and behind me, to see a parking lot full of people with Confederate flags and know what that means. I've been stopped by police for no reason. I've been called boy and n***** and everything else that you could imagine. And so I understand what it is to exist in that space and find your manhood.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CORNISH: A lot has been written about Boseman's path to Marvel's "Black Panther," playing Thurgood Marshall, James Brown, Jackie Robinson. And you've heard about what seeing him in those roles meant to so many people. Consider this; what did it take for Chadwick Boseman to go from that school bus in South Carolina to joining the ranks of the biggest movie stars of the past decade? And what has it meant for Hollywood?

From NPR News, I'm Audie Cornish. It's Monday, August 31.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CORNISH: Back in 1998, nine theater students from Howard University were accepted to a prestigious summer program at the British Academy of Dramatic acting in the U.K. One of those students was Chadwick Boseman. And. He and some of his fellow students needed help covering tuition, so one of their professors at Howard, Cosby Show actress Phylicia Rashad, was determined to help them, and she called up a friend.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE LATE SHOW WITH STEPHEN COLBERT")

DENZEL WASHINGTON: I'm going to screw this story up. But Phylicia Rashad was helping kids, and she called different people. And she called me, and I said yeah, I'll sponsor wherever.

CORNISH: Denzel Washington told the story on "The Late Show With Stephen Colbert" in 2018 about how he agreed to help pay.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: Imagine receiving the letter that your tuition for that summer was paid for and that your benefactor was none other than the dopest actor on the planet.

CORNISH: Chadwick Boseman described how it happened at an American Film Institute tribute to Denzel Washington in 2019.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: There is no "Black Panther" without Denzel Washington...

(APPLAUSE)

BOSEMAN: ...And not just because of me but my whole cast. That generation stands on your shoulders. The daily battles won, the thousand territories gained, the many sacrifices you made for the culture on film sets through your career, the things you refused to compromise along the way laid the blueprints for us to follow. And so now...

CORNISH: Boseman had thanked Washington before - in fact, in person, Washington said.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE LATE SHOW WITH STEPHEN COLBERT")

WASHINGTON: So I went to the - no, it's a true story. I went to the trailer - I went to the premiere for "Black Panther" here in New York, and I saw Ryan Coogler and Chad. He's - oh, you know, I just wanted to thank you for paying. I said, yeah, that's why I'm here. I'm not here - yeah, I like the movie "Black Panther." Yeah, Wakanda forever, but where's my money?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CORNISH: But, of course, the lesson Denzel Washington taught Chadwick Boseman was not about paying anything back. It was about paying it forward.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: H-U.

CORNISH: Boseman told a story in his commencement address at Howard University a few years back about a role he turned down early in his career. It was a role he said that played on racial stereotypes.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: The writing failed to search for specificity. Plus, there was barely a glimpse of positivity or challenge in the character, barely a glimpse of hope. I would have to make something out of nothing. I was conflicted.

CORNISH: Boseman clashed with the show's producers. And ultimately, they fired him.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: Whatever you choose for a career path, remember; the struggles along the way are only meant to shape you for your purpose. When I dared to challenge the system that would relegate us to victims and stereotypes with no clear historical backgrounds, no hopes and talents, when I questioned that method of portrayal, a different path opened up for me - the path to my destiny.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CORNISH: Chadwick Boseman could see that path with the help of Denzel Washington. And today more artists can see their own path because of Chadwick Boseman. But we don't want to say that Washington passed the torch to Boseman because Chadwick Boseman disliked the whole notion that there was only one torch and only one person carrying it.

JAMIL SMITH: Here is a guy who - in Chadwick - who had already portrayed what I regard as superheroes, you know, Thurgood Marshall, you know, Jackie Robinson...

CORNISH: Jamil Smith, a senior writer at Rolling Stone, wrote about Boseman's biggest role, his turn as star of the billion-dollar Marvel superhero film "Black Panther." Smith told me even before the film was out, Boseman seemed to have a sense of what it could mean to pop culture and how its success could affect change in Hollywood.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NPR BROADCAST)

SMITH: When I spoke with him in 2018 to talk about "Black Panther," this is somebody who, even before the film had come out, knowing the anticipation and the hype, he hoped to see the excitement manifest in more opportunities for people of color throughout the business. And I'm quoting him now - also having people inside spaces, gatekeeper positions, people who can open doors and take that idea. How can this be done? How can we be represented in a way that is aspirational? So he understood that this film had the power to change Hollywood.

CORNISH: It became one of the top grossing films of all time in North America but, to your point, was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including best

picture - right? - and that those weren't awards for him that opened up the door to other Black artists who were nominated and even won in other categories that they don't normally.

SMITH: Indeed. Indeed. And the point is that we can realize this kind of potential if people in powerful positions give them a chance. And it's the story of the world. Who are the decision-makers? It's important to have Chadwick Bosemans, but it's also important to have people like Nate Moore at Marvel, who was a key gatekeeper in making sure that the "Black Panther" story was told in the first place. So...

CORNISH: And this is a Black executive there, right?

SMITH: Exactly. Nate is Black. And so I think overall, the long-term impact could be that Hollywood understands that there are more Chadwick Bosemans out here to be plucked.

CORNISH: A few years back, he told a reporter, Kelley Carter - she's now at The Undeclared - that - you know, he said, you know, people come up to me and say, look; the torch is going to be passed to you. And he said, quote, "I don't think that's right 'cause it's possible for there to be a Chris Pine, a Chris Evans, a Chris O'Donnell and a Chris Hemsworth and all the other Chrises, but it can only be one of us at a time." That part of it is what's wrong.

SMITH: Exactly.

CORNISH: Does Boseman's career, though, show that that's changing? Who were the others in his class, so to speak, and how did he kind of lead the charge in this?

SMITH: I would say one of them was his co-star in the film, you know, Michael B. Jordan, who I think is one of more formidable actors in Hollywood right now. And...

CORNISH: And he's the star of the "Creed" movies and also owns his own production company.

SMITH: Exactly. And he, like Chadwick, is seeking to expand opportunity for more stories to be told. And I think, you know, of course, Denzel and Morgan Freeman before him and Sidney Poitier before him surely expressed these kinds of sentiments. And my hope is that other actors - you know, you have, you know, Letitia Wright. You have Danai Gurira. And you have, you know, still the dean Angela Bassett, other folks who are just in that film alone who helped to portray the - you know, the vast array of experiences that Black folks have within this world.

CORNISH: Can you talk a little bit about some of the obstacles in Hollywood not that are about race but are often talked about in the context of business? So this isn't just about "Black Panther," but there is a certain idea about how - who can

lead a film and why, who can promote a film and why. What are some of the common ideas?

SMITH: Oh. I mean, certainly that Black films don't play overseas. That's No. 1. The idea that someone in China is not going to want to go see "Black Panther" was completely blown out of the water - and not merely "Black Panther," of course, but also a story that reflects the full scope of Black humanity. Hollywood not merely has the evidence in terms of its financial success but also the cultural impact of this film. And it was a film that reflected importantly the diversity of Black perspectives throughout the world.

CORNISH: I don't want to be Pollyanna about the future and Chadwick Boseman's legacy. What should we be looking for going forward, you know, in the aftermath, unfortunately, of this career?

SMITH: Well, unfortunately, I think what his career shows us, in a way, is that we're going to need a whole lot more Chadwick Bosemans. We're going to need a lot more storytellers - whether in front of the camera or behind it - who are interested in representing the vast array of experiences within African and African American life. And we're going to need those people to be vocal about it. We're going to need those people to take an active interest in portraying those characters, in putting those stories on-screen because we've been prodding people, I feel like, for years, for decades, for generations to tell our stories in a way that reflect the full scope of our humanity.

And frankly, a lot of people have not been listening. We've had to do it ourselves. And unfortunately, we're going to need a lot more people pushing in the way that Chadwick pushed during his short life. And I think that, yes, he made an enormous impact, but the job isn't done.

CORNISH: Jamil Smith, senior writer at Rolling Stone - he profiled Chadwick Boseman for Time magazine back in 2018. And there's a link to that piece in our episode notes.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: (Singing) Grandma's hands clapped in church on Sunday morning.

CORNISH: We're going to leave you now with the sound of Chadwick Boseman in a 2018 interview with Peter Travers, who likes to ask his guests to close with a song. Chadwick Boseman sang "Grandma's Hands."

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: (Singing) Grandma's hands used to issue out a warning. She'd say, Chad, don't you run so fast. You might fall on a piece of glass.

CORNISH: Additional reporting this episode from our colleagues at All Things Considered. For more news, download the NPR One app or listen to your local public radio station. Supporting that station makes this podcast possible.

We're back with more tomorrow. I'm Audie Cornish.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

BOSEMAN: (Singing) Might be snakes there in that grass. Grandma's hands.

PETER TRAVERS: I love "Grandma's Hands."

BOSEMAN: Now I want to sing it again and sing it better.

(LAUGHTER)

TRAVERS: No.

BOSEMAN: I was trying to...

TRAVERS: We want the first - and the way...

BOSEMAN: No.

TRAVERS: No. It's...

BOSEMAN: Take two (laughter).

TRAVERS: There's no take twos on this show. We don't do take twos. I'm sorry. It's all over.

BOSEMAN: 'Cause I had to come up with it right now.

TRAVERS: But that was why it was great.

BOSEMAN: Oh, man.

TRAVERS: You just made that come through.

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