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## Madison West grad heads to Hollywood

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Denzel Love



### CONTENT FROM OUR PARTNER - MADISON365

Denzel Irby wasn't planning on being an actor.

"I grew up playing sports," he told Madison365. As a junior at Madison West, though, he gave the stage a try in a high school production of *The Miracle Worker*.

"It's kind of cliché, but the first time I got on stage I kind of knew I wanted to do this for the rest of my life. I hit that stage, and I felt that light on me, it just felt natural," he said. "It felt like the place for me. It was a done deal."

Once that decision was made, it was off to Chicago and the prestigious Theatre School at DePaul University, where his natural talent became clear.

"They audition in LA, New York, kids come in from all around the world," he said. "Me, being a person who just started acting and did it on a whim. The craziest thing about it is I got accepted. You aren't guaranteed to stay in the school. After the first year, they have a thing called 'the cut' where they only invite 28 people back. It was really intense and you really had to be on your Ps and Qs and be passionate and do the work."

He did the work, and not only made it through the rigorous program, but excelled.

"He's a star," said DePaul theatre professor Lisa Protes. "Meant for greatness. He's a tremendous talent. A charismatic and warm and funny soul. I knew from when I met him he's a star. I'm not allowed to have favorites, but if I did, Denny would be right up there."

Irby, known professionally as Denzel Love, has already found some success in Chicago, appearing on the NBC show Chicago PD and in three episodes, so far, of the massive hit show Empire as Barry, an early love interest of the show's leading lady Cookie.

"I didn't know that it would be a recurring role," Irby said. "That kind of happened based off the fact that they just liked my character, they liked the story, they liked my acting, so they just kept giving me episodes, and I hope I get more."

Now, though, it's time to move on from the Windy City.

"I pretty much used up all I can in Chicago," he said. "There's only a certain amount of TV that you can do. There's not a lot of shows. We've got all of the Dick Wolf series, we've got Chicago PD, Chicago Fire, Med, Chicago Justice, but the crazy thing is, once you're on one of those shows you can't be on any of the other shows for three years."

So later this month, he'll strike out to Hollywood and start hitting the auditions. His agency, Chicago-based Gray Talent Group, has offices in New York and Los Angeles.

"It'll be a nice transition," he said. "I'm going out there with some connections, and I've met a lot of really cool people in the industry in LA and Chicago, so it's a perfect time to go. My momentum has been swinging pretty good, man. I can't complain."

Irby said he's pretty open to what kind of roles he'd like to play.

"I'm really interested in doing work that highlights the human experience," he said. "Meaning, stories about struggle or just about stuff that humans go through, just real stories about life. Either dramatic roles or I'm really interested in sci-fi. I'm a nerd. I love The Walking Dead. I love stories about the post-apocalyptic world, just living that fantasy world where you get to play something that isn't just realistic. I just like the opposite. I like the real, gritty, dramatic roles with the tears, the anger, just real human experience. I love the sci-fi fantasy. It would be really cool to play something outside of the world I live in."

Portes, his teacher from DePaul, sees a similar range for Irby.

"The perfect role for Denny is the male equivalent of Emma Stone in La La Land," she said. "A rising star in Hollywood. A young, black, rising star in Hollywood who is changing the game. He could also have been the role that was played by Andre Holland in Moonlight (the adult Kevin). Denny's wheelhouse is charismatic, bright future, street smart, meant for greatness."

As his star continues to rise, though, Irby won't forget his roots — Madison's South Side, where he found solace and belonging at the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County.

"It's always two sides to the coin," Irby said. "A lot of young kids like me weren't able to pursue their dreams because they didn't have a safe haven to go through after school. Maybe they hung out in the streets. The Boys and Girls Club gave me simple foundational things like a place to eat, hang out with my friends. It kept me off the streets. It was a place where I felt safe. I was able to be myself. It meant a lot growing up. I was there probably every day."

"He will become a superstar someday because he has drive, he comes from humble beginnings and has strong will to achieve," said Boys and Girls Clubs of Dane County CEO Michael Johnson. "Plus he is college-educated, talented with a great personality."

That drive earned Irby Youth of the Year honors in 2012.

"It was really cool to get acknowledged for being a part of something bigger than myself," he said. "I don't know how I did it, but it was just a really cool experience meeting other just stand -kids and realizing there are a lot of really smart and talented people out there. The Boys and Girls Club cultivates talent. It gives people guidance and direction. It really is my foundation."

Irby will return to his roots on June 2 to host and headline a variety show at the Allied Drive Boys and Girls Club.

"It's me and my comedy collective," he said. "Comedy, improv, music, dance, all types of stuff. I'll be having a few local artists involved as well."

For now, though, he's ready to get to work.

"The grind never stops," he said.

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