

BEFORE *STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS*, ACTOR OSCAR ISAAC WAS JUST A MIAMI KID

BY MIKE HERNANDEZ

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In the highly anticipated sequel *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, my brother Oscar Isaac plays the new Han Solo, a Resistance ace pilot named Poe Dameron, who is both skillful and reckless.

That's on the mark. When he was a kid attending Westminster Christian Middle School in 1991, he spray-painted the fire extinguishers in the school gym. Authorities expelled him.

After Hurricane Andrew destroyed our childhood home in Country Walk, we moved to Delray Beach, where Oscar really began acting and playing music at Santaluces Community High School. His ska band, the Worms, would rehearse in our basement. I was 8 years old and would sneak in to hear their sessions. Occasionally, I would bang on the drum set, but it was often just to replicate what my brother had done.



A young Oscar and Mike horse playing in their Country Walk home.

Courtesy of Mike Hernandez

To say we grew up in a conservative Christian household would be an understatement. Both my brother and older sister Nicole were enrolled in Westminster Christian School in the mid-'80s, second grade and sixth grade, respectively. I had just been born, so my indoctrination had not begun, but Oscar and Nicole were groomed to be model Sunday-school students.

Oscar, my cousin Ed, and I were avid Nintendo gamers, combing through every Mario, Mega Man, and Ninja Turtles game there was. Once Super Nintendo came out, we dove into Street Fighter, starting a rivalry that continues to this day. These were the first bonding moments I remember sharing, and certainly not the last.

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Hurricane Andrew destroyed our Country Walk home in 1992. We all survived, waking up to a neighborhood that looked like an atomic bomb had gone off. We moved to Delray Beach, where Oscar began to become more involved in music, as well as acting, at his high school.

During those years, I looked up to my older brother – he was someone I recognized to be the definition of “cool.” He would use our father’s camera to make home movies, with either siblings involved or his friends from school, each movie different from the last.

Oscar says he always felt like a fish out of water living in Miami. “It has always felt kind of conservative, culturally and politically; it was a bit rigid for me growing up. It wasn’t a flourishing place for the arts.”

Oscar flunked his senior year of high school – in PE, no less. The reason, according to our father, was that it was an early class (at 7:30 a.m.) and Oscar didn’t show up on time. This is a chronic family disorder, as I too have no love for early activity. Nevertheless, he had decided he would enlist in the Marines when he was done with high school and was already set on enlisting when our parents talked him out of it at the proverbial last minute.



Oscar Isaac talks *Star Wars* with his younger brother.

Adam Hendel

I remember him wearing a camouflage shirt and thinking, *Please don't go*. Even though it was 1997 and we weren't in war, I wouldn't understand until years later the severity of war, but I knew when I saw him dressed as a soldier, that could have possibly been the last time I would see my brother.

Our parents eventually talked him out of enlisting, and instead, he studied performance arts at Miami Dade College and acted in various plays on stages at the Biltmore Hotel, the Coconut Grove Playhouse, and the Area Stage back when it was on Lincoln Road. He even had time to start a popular local band called the Blinking Underdogs.

While Oscar was growing into the man he wanted to become, I was going through a bit of an identity crisis in high school, but his influence really shaped me into the man I later became. He never knew the impact of the little things he did for me. One time, he made me a mix CD filled with punk and ska songs from the Descendants, Pixies, and the Specials. I even got to join him and his band onstage – I still remember singing the Blinking Underdogs' "I Can't Go On, I Go On." Music was always our special language.



Mike (left) and Oscar (right) hang out circa 2010.

Courtesy of Mike Hernandez

Oscar eventually moved to New York City in 2001 and graduated from Juilliard four years later. Since then, his career has taken off.

Of his latest role, Oscar best describes *The Force Awakens* as a symphony – “It had its movements, and like great music, it plays with your expectations” – and his character, Poe, as an instrument – “I was like the oboe that comes in and soars above everything... I was a very specific thing that was needed.”

He does go on to say that Miami has changed in certain ways, that there is more freedom than before and that we are not caught up by the politics of our parents. He’s proud to recognize that and to relive his beginnings, but he makes it clear that he does not represent Miami: “I don’t represent anything except myself. I’m always suspicious of anybody who says they speak for where they’re from or what ethnic group they’re from... because that’s making a lot of generalities about the way people think, and... people don’t think alike.”

We ended our conversation with some ridiculous images that people create online of Oscar – thank you, internet, for doing most of my brotherly job for me – and had time for a few rounds of *Street Fighter* before he had to jump on another plane. In that last moment, the pressure of the *Star Wars* premiere melted away, and it felt like old times – just us two Miami kids playing videogames like we used to. It’s hard not to crack a smile at that.

Star Wars: The Force Awakens

Opens in theaters nationwide Friday, December 18.

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