

BEE TRUE TO YOU

Growing up I felt like an outcast. Adopted at birth, I always felt unsure of where I belonged or where exactly I fit in because I looked "different". My hair was extremely curly, frizzy and my skin color was a darker shade than my adoptive parents-- Making me a victim on multiple occasions of Bullying from my peers and classmates.

For me, when I learned and discovered I had the ability to sing, I began to turn to music, as music always made everything 100 times better. It was my only true escape from the negative thoughts that surrounded me. I knew at a young age I was given the talent of music for a reason and it only made sense for me to use music to help others, like me. That one day I would find my own place and voice in this world and I could make a difference.

Upon graduating college from Montclair State University in 2010, I began touring and working professionally in off-Broadway Children's musicals that all had the same underlying message of acceptance, confidence and learning to believe in yourself. It wasn't until my time touring with Green Day's Broadway Musical, American Idiot in 2012-2013, that my life as I knew it was about to change.

My mom had called me and we were talking on the tour bus and she asked me like she usually did on occasion, what I was going to do once the 14 month world-tour was over. This was a typical question most of my family would ask me over the years, as being an actress isn't always the most 'stable' career choice... I laughed to myself and replied- I have absolutely NO idea.

That's when my mom, a kindergarten teacher in the town of Parsippany, NJ where I grew up, mentioned the idea of assembly programs.

MOM- *"You're really great with kids. You seem to have a calling there. They really respect you and look up to you. You've always played around with the idea of opening up your own music school... Why don't you create your own assembly program?"*

I thought back to the assemblies I had that visited my school when I was a kid. Not all of them were, well- AMAZING, in fact some were pretty boring or super corny, so what could I possibly talk about during an assembly that would be relatable to children? How could I guarantee it would be fun and entertaining- I thought to myself. "How can I relate to children? What are kids, AND myself, both struggling with today?... Acceptance... lack of confidence... bullying... being true to themselves... BEE TRUE TO YOU!"

And that's how it happened!

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If I was going to develop an assembly program, and create a story, it wouldn't be a routine, boring school lecture by any means. It would be Pop, it would be Rock, it would be Interactive, there would be a DJ Mascot and it would be like a Broadway Interactive Concert! I immediately wrote down those 4 magic words, Bee True To You, along with a phrase which is now the Pre-Chorus in my program's theme song...

" It's the courage to believe, the fear to actually succeed, but most importantly it's about--- Being True To You"

Jump to 6 years later, my program has been implemented into the Tri-State Area school system over the last 4 years, performed for over 25,000 kids, signed to 4 different In-School Assembly Program Organizations and has received nothing but stellar reviews from students, parents, and teachers alike. In 2016 I was recognized for my work, and WON the United Nations and Meaningful World's International Youth Peace Award for my humanitarian efforts within the youth community of today! I am extremely proud of what I have accomplished and I truly believe my program has what it takes to make a difference in this world. A world where positivity, happiness and love is always needed, especially during these trying times.

The times of COVID-19.

As we are now heavily into the year of 2020, a new era that most of us thought was going to be some sort of EPIC magical year filled with unicorns riding magic carpets promoting change, positivity, prosperity and growth, 2020 has in some ways reverted our society **and the entire world**, back to an overall state of feeling lost... Defeated... Even broken. There is a lot to say about the "new norm" we are all desperately trying to fit into, and anxiously scrambling to fix and figure out during these unprecedented times with the pandemic of COVID-19. For me in particular, though I have lost a lot of work with Bee True To You during this time, and other paying jobs, like so many other people world-wide, and the future of LIVE Arts Educ-tainment at this current time is extremely unknown, I can't help but see and feel an endless amount of hope, joy and excitement in relation to our program's mission at its core.

Some people may think, "Oh wow- TOBI is so brave" or "Wow, she's really passionate about her career and what makes her happy"... "Good for her, for continuing to create during COVID.. Good for her for staying busy"...Yes. I am SUPER passionate about the message I promote to others, and my trying to make a difference, and every being of my body can't help but remain busy and just create whenever I get the chance. But to say the time period of March- June 2020 wasn't extremely difficult for me, would be a complete and utter lie.

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It wasn't until about the end of May, or maybe the middle, where I finally voiced out loud once, "I think my avoiding tendencies are totally in play here- and hard"... it's what I talk about to my therapist... Which by the way, I am extremely thankful I started weekly therapy a few months prior to the pandemic. Because having someone to talk to, especially during a crisis like COVID- is crucial for your mental health... But anyway--- going back to the need of creating in abundance... I think I'm maybe one of a probably very small percentage of creative types, who literally worked from the SECOND they would wake up, until the second we would go to sleep... and I know some are probably thinking, "yeah I totally work a lot too," and I don't doubt that, but- I truly mean... From the moment I would wake up, aside from precious bathroom moments, and scarfing down food in 5-10 minutes while watching Governor Cuomo on Facebook Live- I literally worked EVERY second of the day. To me.. I just didn't feel accomplished until I did ALL I could that day to try and achieve the next step in my career. Or should I say, learning AND following through with pivoting my work details and then taking the next step in THAT [new] direction.

Yes, of course, SOMETIMES I would do the occasional ZOOM hang with my friends- as depressing as they were because, here I am partying with my friends, and all around me, I have NO idea what is to become of my life. So you just drink, and smile and try and have a good time, reminiscing on the good ole times with friends when you used to hang out at restaurants, all the while you know your industry's economy won't be back into action for a whole YEAR, if even--- But yes. I did "hang" once a week with friends-- but as soon as that hang was over, back to the drawing board I go--- aka, my mac laptop until I forced myself to stop thinking for the day and go to sleep.

The need to create, wasn't just creating for me. It was a way of life- It was my survival, my safety net, which I was holding onto VERY tightly, terrified to let go because I was afraid of the complete unknown...

As the #stayathome periods continued, as hard as the COVID-19 pandemic was for my personal work industry, it also really was a savoir. It completely #woke me from this "yeahhhhhhhh things are going great. I have my own business, and have a few upcoming events.. yay.".... To "I am HUSTling the ShiT out of life, in every capacity possible." I completely pivoted my passion and business to a virtual business, like sooooo many others out there, was taking free workshop lectures advancing my career twice a week, I finally hired that Public Relations Company because I felt for the first time, one of the smartest choices I could make was hiring someone to help differentiate me from my other competitors online, thought about being a life coach for kids, and I finally became that "YOUTUBER". I was longer saying--- "I don't even know where or how

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to begin being a "youtuber", but I know it's important for the advancement of my career working with kids"... Well I can now say I finally DID begin, and I now know "how" and what it takes to "BEE" a consistent youtuber.

During the 2020 pandemic, I took my life into my own hands, took the stack of hung up clothes from my bedroom closet, *literally*, put them into the trunk of my car-- because I really was only wearing the same 4 hand washed workout clothes, and finally built that YOUTUBE creator home office I've been envisioning from Pinterest Pictures... The kind with the inspirational words like, "Believe in yourself", "Be Kind", "Stay Humble" "Be awesome today"... but I finally felt connected to those words, I then hung up LOTS of white christmas lights, got a "hello" NEON led sign, then added a bunch of gear like a 4-40 microphone, a DJ controller, a live STREAM deck live streaming controller, oh and I forgot to add, cycled everyday using the peloton app at 6pm with two friends of mine. I finally took control of my life, made my own positive work environment, and just CREATED after created after created..

I was home. Literally, yes I was working from home.. But I truly felt at home. And for the first time, I felt confident in myself again, and confidence in the decisions I was making. I no longer felt a stranger or imprisoned by the positivity of my brand, but I started to feel empowered.

To this day, up until 2020, I still wonder, was my life just one big avoidance of the real world? Afraid of what I "COULD" accomplish one day, therefore doing everything in my power to get it to that certain point, and then just plateau--ultimately leading to a life of "what ifs", but being content?" --- or --- was this pandemic that skydiving moment I've been dreaming of my whole life, standing in front of that opened door, looking down below into the abyss, with the licensed diver attached to me and finally jumping out of the plane?

For me? Everything goes back to that one moment when I was adopted- from that very moment, I came into this world as a fighter, and that's what I'm meant to do. Fight the good fight. Fight for what I believe in, and fight to have my voice and story, told.

What I learned during the 11 weeks in quarantine, was that Being True To You, is not just a message for children, but it truly is a message all of us need to hear all over the world. Myself included. And not just hear, but to **put. into. action.**

How can we as individuals, continue to learn to empower ourselves, and continue to better ourselves during the not so best circumstances? How can we learn to become comfortable, with the uncomfortable? How can we learn to trust ourselves again and gain confidence in what may have to be a new path for some or a

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complete 180 directional change in one's career? There is no easy answer, in fact it seems as though life as we know it will be changed forever due to the disruption of this pandemic. However, the only way to move forward, is to have a conversation with our youth. Now is the time more than ever, to discover where we all belong in the world, and engage our children and families in this discussion. It is time to let go of fears, barriers, and implicit biases and take control over the power of what it means to Be True To Ourselves. And to figure out, what we need as individuals, to make ourselves truly happy.

As someone who once thought of themselves as just a singer, during the creative process of starting my own business, my life experiences performing and touring the world, and the trials and tribulations life continues to throw my way, I have transformed into a Director, a book writer, a lyricist, a producer, a content creator, a prop/ wardrobe/ and set designer, choreographer, and most importantly an advocate of mental health, bullying awareness for our youth and social/emotional intelligence. Oh right. And that's when I became a life coach. Because I realized I've always been one.

If I could go back in time and say anything to that 8 year old little girl, who was unsure of where she fit in, in the world, thinking to herself always in the background, (how can someone just give up a child)... , or if I could travel into the future and say anything to my great-great-great-great granddaughter, I would tell her that it's true what they say. 1 person really can make a difference. That if you truly believe in yourself and the gifts you were given, THAT is the greatest strength a person can have and that can transcend EVERYTHING. Your differences and your acceptance of your truth, is your Superpower, and to sum it all up in a pretty little bow, my SuperPower...is Being True To You.

-Ashley Tobias (TOBI)

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