



True Colors: Out Youth Theater Prospectus

Description:

True Colors leverages the power of theater to eradicate isolation and fear caused by bigotry and discrimination. True Colors creates a safe haven where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth are supported and challenged to engage fully in their own personal, social, and artistic development. A troupe of LGBT youth and their straight allies, guided by a team of theater artists, works to write, stage, and perform an original play. Their work captures the complexities of their lives, their experiences of oppression and liberation, and their hopes for the future. Troupe members tour the show and facilitate discussions with thousands of their peers in schools and community groups throughout New England. As the only LGBT youth theater program in the region and one of only a handful of similar programs throughout the country, True Colors is uniquely positioned to positively impact the lives of all youth, regardless of identity.

Location:

Boston/Cambridge, MA

Website:

www.thetheateroffensive.org/truecolors.html

Founded: 1994

Current Budget: \$134,000

Geography & People Served:

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) youth and their allies (ages 14-22) in greater Boston

Social Problem:

- An estimated 30,000 youth in Massachusetts identify as LGBT.
- Only one in five lesbian and gay youth could identify someone who was very supportive of them.
- LGBT youth are at high risk for negative outcomes as compared with peers:
 - Four times more likely to attempt suicide
 - Twice as likely to be threatened or injured with a weapon at school
 - Four times more likely to skip school because they feel unsafe
 - Five times more likely to use cocaine

Key Accomplishments & Social Impact:

- Since its founding in 1994, True Colors has served over 300 youth participants, who have engaged over 10,000 audience members.
- Participants thrive in the program and demonstrate achievement of desired outcomes:
 - 81 percent improved public speaking skills
 - 86 percent increased desire for social justice
 - 71 percent improved leadership skills
- Demand for performances has increased 600 percent in the past three years; youth audiences consistently report that they will make different choices regarding LGBT issues as a result of seeing the performance.

Two-Year Goals:

- Double the number of youth served through expansion to year-round programming
- Evaluate options and develop plans to increase capacity to serve youth
- Research, plan, and begin dissemination of program model

Total Investment – Two Years: \$450,000



Contact Information:

Evelyn Francis

617-621-6090

evelyn@thetheateroffensive.org

Ways to Invest

In-Kind Support

- Technology: laptop computer, portable sound system, video/photo equipment
- Database development and data management support
- Two or three board members
- Audit/accounting services
- Human resources advisor
- Printing and copying services

Financial Support

\$50,000	Doubles youth participants through staff to support expanded program
\$25,000	Pays troupe stipends for one year
\$10,000	Pays for travel and food for one touring season
\$5,000	Covers all costs associated with one school performance
\$1,000	Pays one youth stipend for one season

SOCIAL
innovation
FORUM Connecting Leaders, Skills,
Networks, and Capital

a Root Cause social enterprise

Need & Opportunity

"Homophobia is like racism and anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in that it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and personhood."¹

Coretta Scott King

Social Problem

Although the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights movement has made significant progress, pervasive homophobia continues to drive discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender expression.² Indeed, in some cases, high-profile debates over topics such as gay marriage serve to fuel the fires of homophobia and can leave LGBT people even more vulnerable to threats and violence.

This is particularly apparent for the estimated 30,000 young people in Massachusetts who identify as LGBT. Every day, these young people face the effects of bigotry, stigma, and societal oppression in the midst of the typical challenges of moving through adolescence to adulthood.

While some young people are coming out earlier and finding it easier to be openly gay than it was even a decade ago, most continue to struggle and experience negative outcomes and behaviors in response to trauma and victimization. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that sexual minority youth had a lower sense of school belonging, lower self-esteem, and a greater risk of depression than their peers. In addition, truancy caused by a threatening school environment can lead to lower academic achievement and disparities in educational aspirations.³

The 2005 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that, in comparison with their peers, gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people are:

- four times more likely to attempt suicide;
- twice as likely to be threatened or injured with a weapon at school;
- four times more likely to skip school because they feel unsafe;
- five times more likely to use cocaine.

A Massachusetts Department of Social Services supervisor who participated in LGBT training summarized the situation:

I had no idea that LGBT youth were up against so many challenges. I knew that there were statistics about suicide risks and substance abuse that these kids face, but I didn't realize that it was so related to the homophobia they endure and the lack of trained professionals in their lives. Knowing what I know now, I can give them a place to feel safe and be an adult ally.⁴

Root Cause Factors

Bigotry and homophobia in society, often fueled by prejudice and ignorance, are the root causes of the increased risks for LGBT youth. "For LGBT young people, a significant part of adolescence is about coming to terms with membership in a group that is not only seen as 'less than' but may be deemed as despised."⁵ As they struggle to develop their own sense of identity, belonging, and purpose, LGBT young people often encounter unsupportive adults at home and at school, confront verbal and physical threats, and must withstand continual messages from society that their very existence is somehow wrong.

¹ *Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1998, front page

² The term "gender expression" refers to elements of an individual's appearance and behavior that may lead to perceptions and conclusions about that person's gender identity or sexual orientation.

³ Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey, 2005.

⁴ Nicholas Ray, *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness* (New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006), 151.

⁵ A.D. Martin, "Learning to Hide: The socialization of the gay adolescent," *Adolescent Psychology*, 10 (1982).



On another level, LGBT youth face increased risk for negative outcomes because a lack of sufficient support limits their potential for success. In order to engage in positive development, young people need safe, supportive environments that foster self-discovery, encourage good decision-making, and cultivate resilience in the face of obstacles.

Consolidation of one's identity, separation from one's parents, and preparation for independence are key developmental tasks of adolescence and critical for becoming a well-functioning adult in our society. Most adolescents prepare for this transition to adulthood in their homes and school....⁶

While some LGBT young people have supportive families and can take advantage of resources in their schools and communities, most feel isolated and alone as they confront life's challenges.

Furthermore, unlike members of other minority groups, LGBT youth rarely grow up in families that include out LGBT adults. This creates a unique need for individuals in this community to develop their own sense of "family"—including positive adult role models and support—from outside the circle of their family and relatives.

Current Landscape

In December 1993, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a bill prohibiting harassment in the public schools on the basis of sexual orientation. Following this legislation, the Massachusetts Department of Education's Safe Schools Initiative launched many effective programs to support sexual minority youth, including True Colors. The Massachusetts Departments of Social Services and Youth Services are also closely involved with many LGBT youth.

In addition, a statewide network of community-based direct service organizations (LGBT Youth Group Network) works to ensure that LGBT youth in Massachusetts have access to a broad array of supports, services and opportunities. Boston Alliance of LGBT Youth (BAGLY) and Boston Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services (GLASS) serve youth in and around Boston. BAGLY provides social activities, special events, and education about HIV, STDs, drugs, and alcohol. GLASS, a drop-in center for LGBT young people from ages 13 to 25, has several full-time professional staff members who offer referrals to additional resources as well as support on coming out, health issues, and relationships.

Programs such as BAGLY, GLASS, and school-based Gay-Straight Alliances provide support and services to LGBT youth, but they are not specifically designed to provide young people with training in the arts. Research has shown that experiences in the arts have powerful and positive effects on young people, particularly those at greatest risk for negative outcomes.⁷

While many youth theater and arts programs provide opportunities for LGBT youth to participate, research and experience have shown that theater that allows LGBT youth to express and explore their lives and experiences has a greater effect on their positive development.

...the efficacy of theater programs lies not just in their ability to teach students how to rehearse and produce plays, but also in their ability to provide a social, intellectual, and emotional home for students who want to engage in personal journeys of reflection and build solidarity with others...⁸

Given that advantage, LGBT youth stand to benefit more from involvement in a theater program that focuses on LGBT youth and then goes a step further by giving youth the opportunity to create and perform original works. Through the reflective and collaborative process of writing, participants hone their artistic skills and engage in personal development. More importantly, perhaps, by performing their own work, they give voice to their experiences, priorities, and vision.

⁶ Ray, 16.

⁷ "Substantial evidence [exists] linking participation in arts and cultural education to academic achievement and positive development especially among low-income students." Catterall, 1997; Darby, 1994, quoted in MA Special Commission on After School and Out of School Time issue brief: Learning in 3D: Arts and Cultural Programming in Afterschool, Fall 2007.

⁸ Jennifer Chapman, "The Theatre Kids: Heteronormativity and High School Theatre," *Youth Theatre Journal* Vol. 21 (2007): 37.

Social Innovation in Action: The True Colors Model

“For years, [True Colors] has successfully brought LGBT youth to the world of dramatic arts. At a stage of life when identity development is most marked, I know that this program is much more than a theater experience for its participants. For many, it can be the first venue for true healing and self-expression.”

KJ Ward, former director, Boston Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services

As the only LGBT youth arts program in Massachusetts, True Colors leverages the power of theater to provide an experience reaching far beyond the stage. A program of The Theater Offensive,⁹ True Colors works with youth who are most intensely affected by homophobia, providing them with needed support and creative tools to confront bigotry and discrimination in their lives. True Colors then connects the youth with audiences of their peers to mobilize them for change in the community at large. Three interdependent components—Personal Development, Theater Skills Training, and Audience Engagement—comprise the core of the True Colors Program.



Personal Development

The issues and challenges faced by LGBT youth in general are reflected among True Colors participants. However, intake data collected from the past four troupes shows that True Colors participants are among the most intensely affected by homophobia, and often they have reached a crisis point where their safety and well-being are at significant risk.

- 67 percent live in neighborhoods with high rates of violence
- 61 percent have a history of family abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
- 63 percent have attempted suicide
- 52 percent have substance abuse issues
- 39 percent have been or currently are homeless

True Colors supports its youth by providing a safe space, adult support, and opportunities to develop positive peer relationships. Rehearsal space is on safe, accessible, neutral youth turf. Participants are encouraged to be candid and open, yet mindful of the bounds of respectful communication. A lead teacher organizes two to four teaching artists who serve as adult mentors. In addition, True Colors Peer Mentors—former troupe members who have been trained in previous seasons—assist participants with their work and provide support. This also ensures that former troupe members stay connected with the program and the network of support and services provided. As True Colors is not designed to address all of its participants' personal needs, staff members work closely with collaborators (BAGLY, GLASS, and other social service programs) to handle issues and emergencies that have ranged from physical and mental health concerns, to sudden homelessness, to court involvement. In addition,

⁹ Founded in 1989, The Theater Offensive is New England's premier LGBT theater company. A charter resident theater company at the Boston Center for the Arts and recipient of numerous national awards, The Theater Offensive showcases new works that reflect the diversity of the LGBT community.

True Colors builds close relationships with the schools its participants attend and with the families that the youth feel part of (including self-defined peer families), helping them strengthen their support network outside the program.

Theater Skills Training

At the beginning of each 16-week season (fall and spring), the troupe holds auditions for new members. Participation in True Colors does not require any theater experience and there are no fees. In fact, troupe members are paid a modest stipend for their participation in the program. For some troupe members, the stipend represents a “first job” or first professional theater experience. Perhaps more importantly, for many troupe members who are supporting themselves the stipend provides critical financial support. The troupe comprises a diverse group of 12 to 14 LGBT youth (ages 14-22) and their allies. The table below provides additional information about True Colors troupe members.

TRUE COLORS PARTICIPANTS	
87 percent identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual	
13 percent identify as straight allies	
63 percent are youth of color	
41 percent are first-generation Americans or part of immigrant families	
46 percent identify as female	
54 percent identify as male	
26 percent identify as transgender or gender queer	

During the first eight weeks of the season, the troupe engages in the creation of a new theater piece based on their identity, their experiences of oppression and liberation, and their hopes for the future. Troupe members commit to six to 10 hours of rehearsal and four hours of homework per week. In the process of creating the performance piece, troupe members are engaged in intensive training in theater arts disciplines including acting, voice, movement, scene development, directing, and design (sound, costumes, and props). As part of writing workshops focusing on the creation of autobiographical materials, troupe members also conduct research about current social issues relevant to youth in general and LGBT youth in particular. The result of this work is a half-hour play composed of up to 10 short pieces, including theatrical scenes, spoken word, music, and monologues.

Audience Engagement

In the second eight weeks of the season, troupe members tour the show to 10 to 15 schools and community groups, performing for 1,000 to 2,000 audience members across New England. At each performance, the troupe leads a 20-minute post-show discussion with the audience, assisted by a printed Learning Guide they have customized to the specific show. Troupe members develop leadership, public speaking, and advocacy skills as they engage the audience in this conversation about issues raised during the performance. For many troupe members, telling their stories to an audience of peers and adults provides an effective opportunity for healing and builds their sense of self-confidence and empowerment.

After the season concludes, True Colors participants stay connected to one another and the program. Troupe members are encouraged to continue their participation in the program for multiple seasons. Returning troupe members take on greater leadership roles, guiding their peers through the process as stage managers or assistant directors. Once they have left the troupe, many remain involved in the program as True Colors Peer Mentors. As mentioned above, Peer Mentors provide support to current troupe members, help with development of the performance piece and program administration, and serve as ambassadors for True Colors in their communities. Former troupe members also move on to positions within other programs at The Theater Offensive and other theater organizations in the community.

Social Impact

In designing and evaluating its program, True Colors focuses on serving its youth participants. However, it also recognizes the significant effect the troupe has on its audiences and, in turn, on the broader community.

To understand its effectiveness, True Colors has developed an evaluation model that gathers quantitative and qualitative data along three tracks: staff observations, participant self-evaluation, and audience evaluation.¹⁰

Youth Participant Impact

True Colors has articulated five program outcomes that it believes will have a major long-term impact in the lives of its participants. Troupe members will:

- 1) develop skills in scriptwriting, theater performance, and theater production to create work that is relevant to the experiences of contemporary youth
- 2) acquire leadership skills to help them play a lead role in addressing bigotry and homophobia
- 3) develop a deeper sense of belonging and identity, including as an artist
- 4) build supportive relationships with peers and adult mentors
- 5) increase their level of participation in the community

True Colors translates these outcomes into a set of social impact indicators, used to evaluate participants' progress. A sample of recent evaluation data shows that True Colors participants are reaching desired outcomes.

Social Impact Indicator	2005	2006	2007
Improved public speaking skills	62%	77%	81%
Improved leadership skills	54%	55%	71%
Increased desire for social justice	75%	68%	86%
Continued participation in the arts	75%	64%	66%
Increased community involvement	23%	41%	48%

Experience and anecdotal evidence also demonstrate the significance of True Colors in the lives of its participants.

True Colors has done a lot for my confidence. I've been acting for a long time, but I used to be really nervous to perform in front of crowds. True Colors has made me more confident in front of people.

-- Patricia, troupe member

It's been one of the best experiences, honestly, that I've ever had, because you learn so much about being vocal and you get to put your heart out there, things that have happened, you get to show to other people, and it's a good feeling.

-- Kathleen, troupe member

I have gotten a lot out of this experience as a whole. I am now aware of my community and finding the strength to be who I am. Being queer and being around people who love you for who you are is a powerful experience.

-- Hansi, troupe member

No one has ever asked me to talk about my life or my feelings before I came here. It feels really good to know that what I have to say matters. My experience is important, too.

-- Susanna, troupe member

¹⁰ A process for former troupe members to report on long-term outcomes is currently in development.

Audience Impact

While program design and evaluation focus primarily on the needs of its youth participants, True Colors values its impact on its audiences as well. Written audience evaluation forms, informal feedback, and a consistently increasing demand for performances provide True Colors with an understanding of the effectiveness of its work.

As an educator, it was so exciting to see my students be able to ask questions and get frank open feedback. All the performances were so engaging and provocative in such an important way.
-- high school teacher, audience member.

I get pushed around and called "gay" at school. It's been hard, but after watching this I see that you have to be you no matter what people say. -- high school junior, audience member.

My cousin came out to her parents and when they kicked her out she came to stay with us. She didn't tell me what she was going through at the time. Watching this show helped me see what she couldn't say.
-- high school junior, audience member.

This is history, what you are showing. The same has happened to Blacks and Immigrants. You are showing not only what happens to you as gays, but to all of us. We can all see ourselves in this performance. -- high school sophomore, audience member.

Program Performance

True Colors tracks the data below to measure the program's growth and development. True Colors participants often choose to return for a second or third season, and former participants remain engaged as Peer Mentors after they have left the troupe. Requests for performances have increased 600 percent over the past three years.

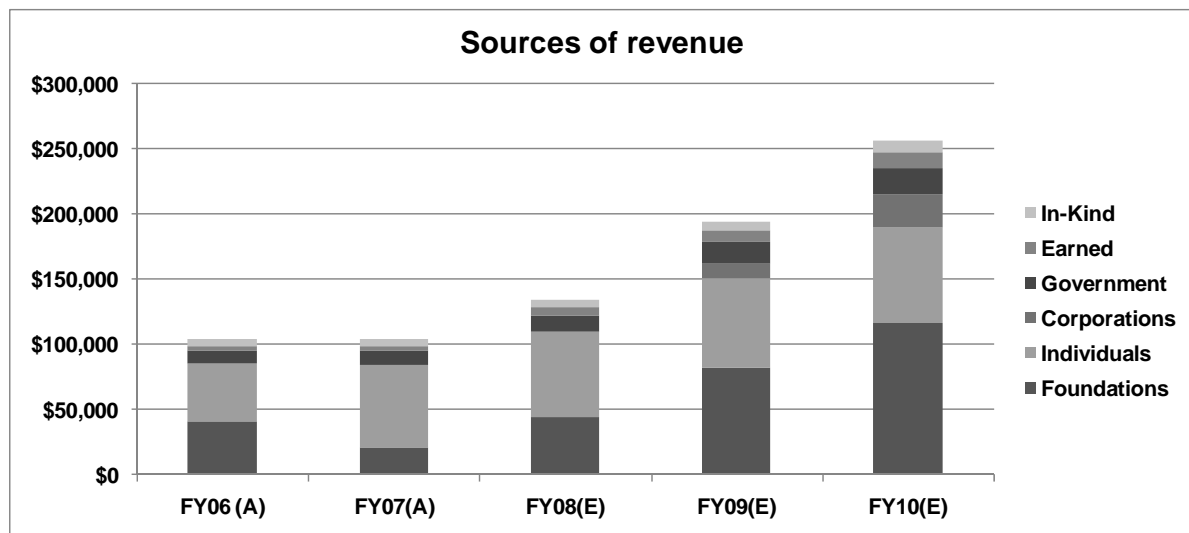
	2006A	2007A	2008E	2009E	2010E
Number of youth troupe participants	23	22	26	26	50
Number of True Colors Peer Mentors served	18	28	32	36	40
Number of performances	23	25	25	30	35
Number of audience members	2,064	2,555	3,000	3,500	4,000

Financial Sustainability

Since its founding in 1994, True Colors has received funding from a variety of public and private sources. Since 1996, True Colors has received support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council as a YouthReach award winner. True Colors also leverages in-kind support, including rehearsal space provided by the Cloud Foundation. Further support from individuals and foundations has allowed True Colors to grow, including a significant growth phase in FY 2006. This phase included the hiring of Evelyn Francis as full-time education director, and has brought the program to capacity in youth served and performance engagements.

	2005A	2006A	2007A	2008E	2009E	2010E
Total Budget	\$50,000	\$105,595	\$112,399	\$133,901	\$194,050	\$256,000
Total FTEs	.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	2.25	2.25

True Colors plans another significant growth phase for 2009-10. Within the context of an organizational capacity-building effort at The Theater Offensive, True Colors will dedicate increased resources to broadening and developing its funding sources. Through this work, it is expected that individuals will remain a strong source of support as contributions from the foundation community provide an increasing percentage of total revenue. With additional resources, True Colors will be able to expand its capacity to serve individual youth as well as its number of performances and audience reach. Also, in response to numerous requests, True Colors plans to multiply its impact through a program to disseminate its model.



Leadership

Evelyn Francis, director of education for The Theater Offensive, leads True Colors. Evelyn brings a variety of relevant experiences to her role, including her work as manager of art and culture at United South End Settlements, program coordinator at City Stage Company, and teaching artist at Underground Railway Theater. A dedicated, dynamic, and capable artist and teacher, Evelyn holds a master's degree in theater education from Emerson College and a youth development training certificate from the BEST Initiative. Abe Rybeck, founder and artistic director of The Theater Offensive, has worked to support True Colors since its inception, and continues to provide leadership and vision for the program on a day-to-day basis. He has received several national and regional awards for his artistry and community leadership, and holds a certificate in executive leadership in nonprofit arts management from Harvard Kennedy School. In addition to staff, True Colors is supported by the board of The Theater Offensive and several active volunteers.

Key Funders

True Colors has received funding from a variety of sources, demonstrating support for the organization's approach and results to date. They include:

- Boston Cultural Council
- The Boston Foundation
- The Boston Globe Foundation
- Brodsky Foundation
- Cambridge Arts Council
- Cambridge Savings Bank
- The Cloud Foundation
- Columbus Development
- Common Stream Foundation
- Greeley Foundation
- Hunt Alternatives Fund
- Massachusetts Cultural Council
- Starbucks Foundation
- Wainwright Bank

Key Measures Report with Targets (April 2008 – March 2009)

Below is a summary of the key measures that True Colors: Out Youth Theater will be tracking for the first 12 months after the Social Innovation Forum's showcase event, as a way to demonstrate progress toward its two-year goals, capture lessons learned, and make course corrections as needed:

	Baseline (March 08)	Target (March 09)**
Program Performance		
Maintain program at full capacity:		
- Youth in troupe annually	26	26
- True Colors Peer Mentors annually	32	36
- Audience members annually	3,000	3,500
Expand capacity through program in summer 2009	Plan has been written	Hire staff member Book location Commit to project budget
Program dissemination goal	Resources identified for research	Research phase produces best practice options
Organizational Health/Capacity-Building		
Implement a data management system for audience surveys	Data collected and reviewed manually	Store data electronically and use database for analysis
Increase revenue from foundations	\$44,000	\$82,000
Increase revenue from corporations	\$2,500	\$11,000
Increase number of individual donors by 35 percent	43	58
Add three board members	7	10

** includes all spring 2009 troupe data

Success Stories

Melissa Li

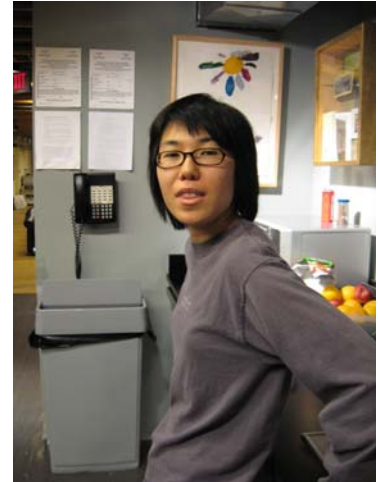
I grew up as the only daughter in a Chinese immigrant family. As a single parent, my mother worked several jobs to make ends meet. At an early age, I knew that I was different from other girls, but I had no idea how to describe myself or how to come out to my mother. English was my second language, and I had never heard a Cantonese word for lesbian. When I did come out, my mother couldn't understand why I was hurting and disappointing her. My brother thought it was his role as "man of the house" to stop me from being a lesbian. I felt alone and scared.

At 16, I began exploring the arts as a means to express myself, making short films and writing songs. I was awestruck when I first saw True Colors perform, and I knew that I wanted to be part of the troupe.

As the only arts program for LGBT youth and allies in the area, True Colors provided a unique opportunity for me to develop my skills as a performing artist, a leader, and a writer. Being part of True Colors has deeply enriched my life. It gave me a place where I could be myself and flourish in the arts. I have had the opportunity to teach thousands of youth about tolerance and acceptance simply by honestly portraying my own experiences. And because of the cultural diversity of the troupe, I too, have learned to be more accepting of people's experiences and differences.

In 2003, with the support of True Colors staff, I began writing *Surviving the Nian*, a musical about an Asian woman's struggle to come out to her family. It is about the balance of loyalty between oneself and one's family, the struggle towards acceptance, and the weight of sacrifice and love. In 2007, The Theater Offensive produced *Surviving the Nian*, and it was honored with the prestigious Jonathan Larson Award for Musical Theater. At the award ceremony in New York City, my proud mother stood up in the audience cheering for me.

It has been eight years since I first auditioned for True Colors. In that time, I have had the pleasure of working as a performer, a videographer/filmmaker, an intern, a peer mentor, an assistant director, and a teaching artist for the program. The Theater Offensive has employed me as an artist and administrator. Thanks to True Colors, I look to the future and see a world of possibility. I have been accepted to the NYU Graduate Musical Theatre Writing program for the fall, and I am spending my summer touring the country with my folk-rock-spoken word queer Asian tour!



Thanks to True Colors, I look to the future and see a world of possibility.

Melissa Li

Henry Thompson

Throughout my entire life, I always felt like there was this BIG secret that I wasn't telling people. For a long time, I wasn't even ready to admit it to myself. This secret always kept me from forming close relationships with others, and I felt like even my closest friends didn't really know me. I didn't have the courage to come out as transgender.

When I did come out, there was a lot of pressure from my family. They weren't familiar with transgender issues at all and were unable to give me the support I needed. It was hard to make such a radical change without them. Then I found True Colors.

I was really nervous at the audition. I didn't know what to expect. I thought that it was going to be formal and stuffy and imposing. Instead it was fun, and there were a lot of people my age. People were genuinely interested in my story, and I found others in the group who were transitioning like me!

Being part of True Colors has been amazing for me. It's a safe space where I can let down all my defenses, talk about the hard stuff, be real, and find solidarity with others. I am inspired by how transformative art can be for those involved. It has given me confidence and a better sense of self. True Colors is a surrogate family that accepts me for who I am and encourages me to explore and grow.

With art you take the invisible and make it visible. You take something that no one else can see, and you bring it into being. I think that applies to a play that hasn't been written, or a photograph that hasn't been taken, or a gender identity that hasn't yet been expressed. I consider transitioning an art form. True Colors has given me the courage to be my own artist.



True Colors is a surrogate family that accepts me for who I am and encourages me to explore and grow.

Henry Thompson