

**THE
ABSOLUTE
BRIGHTNESS
OF
LEONARD
PELKEY**

**WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY
JAMES LECESNE**

**DIRECTED BY
TONY SPECIALE**

**ORIGINAL MUSIC BY
DUNCAN SHEIK**

**BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH
DARYL ROTH AND DARREN BAGERT**



STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

This study guide serves as a classroom tool for teachers and students, and addresses the following standards:

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading Literature: *Key Ideas and Details*

- **Grades 9-10:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- **Grades 9-10:** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **Grades 11-12:** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS FOR THEATRE

Theatre/Creating

- **TH:Cr1.1.HSI-c.** Use script analysis to generate ideas about a character that is believable and authentic in a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Cr1.1.HSII-b.** Investigate the collaborative nature of the actor, director, playwright, and designers and explore their interdependent roles in a drama/theatre work.

Theatre/Responding

- **TH:Re7.1.HSI-a.** Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-a.** Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-b.** Identify and compare cultural perspectives and contexts that may influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSI-c.** Justify personal aesthetics, preferences, and beliefs through participation in and observation of a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re8.1.HSIII-b.** Use new understandings of cultures and contexts to shape personal responses to drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-b.** Consider the aesthetics of the production elements in a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Re9.1.HSI-c.** Formulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of a drama/theatre work by considering its specific purpose or intended audience.

Theatre/Connecting

- **TH:Cn10.1.HSI-a.** Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas and personal beliefs impact a drama/theatre work.
- **TH:Cn11.2.HSI-b.** Use basic theatre research methods to better understand the social and cultural background of a drama/theatre work.

GUIDELINES FOR ATTENDING THE THEATRE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to Hartford Stage.

- How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?
 - › Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience can affect what kind of performance the actors give. No two audiences are exactly the same and no two performances are exactly the same—this is part of what makes theatre so special! Students' behavior should reflect the level of performance they wish to see.
- Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. Audience members are more than welcome to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be?
 - › Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!
- Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off. Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food and gum should not be taken into the theatre.
- Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun. If possible, restrooms should be used only during intermission.

A NOTE FROM JAMES

“It’s based on a real story, right?”

As a playwright, this is the kind of comment that makes me feel as though I’ve done my job. It tells me that there’s something true to life about my story, and the audience believes what they’ve been told.

I developed *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey* downtown at Dixon Place, and after each performance audience members would congregate at the bar and someone would inevitably ask me that same question. Is it true? When I explained that no, in fact, I made it all up, they often seemed a little suspicious. “Really,” they say, “I’m almost sure I remember hearing that story on news.”

So here’s the story I wrote. Chuck DeSantis, a local detective in a small New Jersey town, investigates the disappearance of a 14-year-old boy known for his joyous spirit and flamboyant sense of style. As the inhabitants of the town reflect on Leonard Pelkey’s life and their personal interactions with him, they come to understand just how much he affected their lives. And as Chuck delves deeper into the mystery, he discovers the price Leonard payed for being different, and finds himself connected to everyone in the community in surprising ways. The owner of the local hair salon, her 16-year-old daughter, the older man who works the clock repair shop, a teenage video gamer geek and the wife of a local mobster are just a few of the characters I portray in this solo play.

Since its premiere at Dixon Place, *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey* has reached many more people. As I travel around the country, I’m happy the show inspires people to think about the obstacles young people face when they make up their mind to be true to themselves and the ways they inspire us all to be absolutely brighter.



Actor & Writer James Lecesne.
Photo by Matthew Murphy.

—James Lecesne

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

Going Solo

By Krista DeVellis

Solo performances through the years have included lectures, vaudeville acts, stand-up comedy acts, magic shows, and plays. Edgar Allen Poe, Alexander Graham Bell, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain were all known during their time to give entertaining and enlightening lectures to audiences (Alekson 2010). Today stand-up comedians such as Louis CK, Sarah Silverman, Aziz Ansari, and Tig Notaro tell their stories and jokes to adoring fans. Most solo performers break the fourth wall, meaning they speak directly to the audience. The performers often tell the audience a story, and may even interact with the audience as they perform.

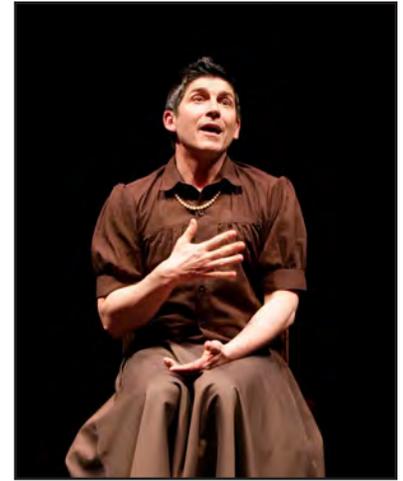
While it may seem like solo performers have created everything themselves, they may not be the only ones involved in a production. Producers, directors, writers, musicians, and designers can all play a role in the creation of a one-man-show. However, unlike shows with multiple actors, ultimately the solo performer is the driving force. Paula T. Alekson, a dramaturg with the McCarter Theatre, states “Regardless of their mode or form, one-person shows give the solo performer power, control, and complete responsibility over the work in performance” (Alekson 2010).



James Lecesne in Hartford Stage’s 2007 production of *I Am My Own Wife*.
Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

In *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, the cast includes only one person; James Lecesne. Playing all of the characters in a story is nothing new for Lecesne. When he was just getting started in the New York theatre scene in the 1980s, he did not know anyone in the business, so he wrote and performed his own play called *One Man Band*. Even as his theatre connections grew and he no longer needed to do everything himself, he returned to solo performance. In the 1990s he toured his one-man show *Word of Mouth*, directed by Eve Ensler (Brunner 2015). He played over 30 characters in Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife* at Hartford Stage in 2007. All of these performances were challenging feats of acting for the performer.

Solo performances can offer a different style of storytelling in the theatre. They can share a personal story, create a completely fictitious world, or in James Lecesne's case, a bit of both. In an interview with *Teachers & Writers Magazine*, Lecesne said "I think that every story that a person tells is basically their own story. Whether you tell a story that's strictly autobiographical or whether you tell a story that's fictional, you are telling some aspect of your story, which is based on what you believe" (Burgess 2015). It is this realization that that makes his solo shows so vivid and vulnerable. Every story is an extension of himself, and while he plays many different characters, he must find a way to connect with each one.



James Lecesne in Hartford Stage's 2007 production of *I Am My Own Wife*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How many different characters do you think you could play in one story? What would you use or do to differentiate between roles? What personal story might you tell as a solo performance?
- Why do you think James Lecesne chose to play all of the roles himself? What does the audience gain or lose with one person acting out every part?
- What would be the hardest thing about performing solo? What would be the easiest?
- What do you think the role of the director is in a solo performance? How is this different than in a more traditional play?

Writer-Actor James Lecesne Morphs Into 9 of His Characters

Reprinted with permission from Boris Kachka's 2015 article in *New York Magazine*

Although there is only one actor, *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey* features many characters. Lecesne seems to effortlessly morph from character to character through changes in his voice, gestures, and facial expression. It is as if the whole fictional New Jersey town lives within one man. In the comments below, James Lecesne describes how he gets into character for nine of the people he plays in the show.

GLORIA SALZANO: "She's the widow of a mobster—she's seen a lot of evil. There's a pursed thing to her mouth as if she doesn't want the wrong thing to slip out. She's lonely, and the binoculars indicate her desire to look outside her life. Her eyes are very wide, and for me that's the thing about her. I grew up with these women—intuitively smart but intellectually not so much."

CHUCK DESANTIS: "He's a small-town detective, one of the good guys—my straight alter ego. Chuck's center of gravity is so different from mine. Mine tends to be forward, but his is more grounded. More pelvic. And very matter-of-fact, so he's always up front about his presentation. He doesn't use extraneous gestures."

ELLEN HERTLE: "Early 40s. She runs the local beauty salon, a small-town Liz Taylor, with something messy about her. I get up on my toes, my way of being in heels—a little unstable. Something I learned from a Kabuki performer who plays women: a woman's hips are wider than her shoulders, so as a man, you present hips forward, torso slightly tilted to one side."

OTTO BECKERMAN: "German, early 70s; he runs the local clock shop. I did [Doug Wright's] *I Am My Own Wife*, which has 37 characters, more than half German, but I've never had a dialect coach—I'm sure it's all wrong. He's probably six inches shorter than I am, almost like he's weighed down by his past. He has a

tremor in one hand, which is how I stay in touch with him.”

BUDDY HOWARD: “He is the leader of the Buddy Howard School of Drama and Dance. He has a posh accent but also a strange, distinctive lisp. So it would be hard to imagine him as a successful actor at home in England, but in New Jersey, he’s found a way. He’s filled with florid physical gestures. Everyone assumes he’s gay, but then he introduces his wife. That’s just his affect.”

TRAVIS LEMBECK: “He’s 19; he’s troubled. He’s playing a video game, and he has longish hair, so he has a tic of whipping it out of his eyes. He tends to talk out of the side of his mouth—a physical manifestation of never telling the exact truth. When he’s standing, he has his hands in his back pockets like having something behind your back, a secret.”

MARTY BRANAHAN: “Chuck’s cop partner. So New Jersey—a brash kind of working guy that I knew well growing up. He has a very wide stance, which allows me to give the impression of somebody much larger—I try to take up as much space as possible. He has a tendency to flail with his arms, and his head is a little loose on his shoulders.”

PHOEBE HERTLE: “She’s 16—a really smart teenager faced with an adult problem. She’s incredibly self-conscious, yet she wants to be seen, so she’s fighting this desire to hide. She has an inner motor that is acting against these exterior gestures of, basically, ‘Oh my God, my hair, my socks.’ She’s always pulling at her socks. Her gestures are literally close to the vest.”

MARION TOTCHERMAN: “She’s in her late 60s, lifelong smoker, probably had her heyday back in the ‘80s. There’s a trick to doing her rasp so that you don’t destroy your voice, mostly in my facial mask. So much of Marion happens in the lower part of her face. Repositioning my jaw, pushing it a little bit forward, that creates her kind of old-lady neck.”

The Trevor Project: How Little Ripples Create Big Change

By Erin Rose

The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey is not the first time creator James Lecesne has explored the world of an alienated young man. His first exploration of the theme grew into something so powerful it became a national organization called The Trevor Project, the nation’s only 24/7 lifeline for LGBTQ youth. But before the name was a source of hope for millions of young people, Trevor was just a character in a one-man play.

In 1994, James Lecesne played a young boy named Trevor in his award-winning play *Word of Mouth*. Film producers Peggy Rajski and Randy Stone saw the production and were incredibly moved by the young character Lecesne had created. “Convinced Trevor’s story would make a wonderful short film, Stone and Rajski invited Lecesne to adapt it into a screenplay” (The Trevor Project 2017). The film, *Trevor*, directed by Rajski, tells the story of a gay teenager who loves musical theatre and whose inability to express his inner self leads him to make a clumsy attempt at suicide. It was critically acclaimed and went on to win the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film.



All of the props and costumes Lecesne uses in the show are laid out on one table. Photo by Matthew Murphy.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicidal thoughts and feelings can subside if the person is able to talk with a compassionate family member or friend. However, some young people don't have a support system of people they feel they can talk to (Duran 2016). So when HBO planned to air the film in 1998, the creators wanted to include the number of an LGBTQ Youth Support hotline for young people like Trevor who feel they have no one to turn to. Surprisingly, there were none in existence at that time. Rajski, Stone, and Lecesne quickly recruited mental health experts, secured funding, and figured out how to build the infrastructure necessary for a nationwide 24-hour crisis line (The Trevor Project 2017). When Ellen DeGeneres hosted the premiere of the film, The Trevor Project went live. On the first day, almost 1,500 people called (McElroy 2015).

NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE?

Trevor Lifeline is live
24 hours a day,
7 days a week:
866-488-7386

For more information
about the Trevor Project,
check out their website at
www.thetrevorproject.org

Since then, The Trevor Project has expanded from the original phone hotline to becoming the premier organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ teens and young adults. Among their newer services are TrevorChat, a free and confidential instant messaging service, and TrevorText, in which young people can safely and securely text with a Trevor counselor any time of the day or night. They also offer training and workshops for young people, adults, and even school districts in suicide prevention techniques, how to be an LGBTQ ally, standing up to bullying, and how to ask for help (The Trevor Project 2017).

The hotline, however, is still the heart of The Trevor Project. 2016, a year fraught with fear and uncertainty for the LGBTQ community, saw a surge in calls to the hotline from frightened young people. "A day after the Orlando massacre [a mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub, a gay bar in Orlando, Florida, where a gunman killed 49 people],

we had the highest single day call volume we've had in over a year," says The Trevor Project's David Bond. "The day after the election, we had twice as many incoming contacts as we did the day after the Orlando massacre" (Duran 2016). The number of calls received in the week following the election ended up setting a record in the organization's 18-year history (Duran 2016).

It is the job of the people working at The Trevor Project to help ease the fears of those who call. They undergo three months of training in how to be a good listener. "When you go to a friend with a problem, you don't want your friend to come back to you and say, 'What you need to go do is this and this and this,'" said Trevor Project trainer, Chris Bright, in a radio interview in December 2016. "You want your friend to be like, 'Wow, that sounds really hard and I want you to know that I'm here in whatever ways you need me to be here for you'" (Duran 2016).

Sam Brinton was a scared, confused 19-year-old college student in Kansas when he initially reached out to The Trevor Project 8 years ago. He described his experience to Southern California Public Radio:

I had just basically failed a test. As I was walking home, someone screamed out the F-word as he's driving past in his pickup. And no one said anything. There were people walking right by me on the street, and no one said anything. I looked around in this shock of, "No one cares that I'm here." [He called The Trevor Project to speak with a counselor.] She told me that it may feel that we're alone, but we're never really alone. We always have someone to talk to, just like you're talking to me right now. That community cared enough for me to be on the phone when I needed them. (Duran 2016)

When James Lecesne originally created the character of Trevor back in 1994, it is unlikely that he could have ever foreseen that character would set off a chain of events that would save the life of someone like Mr. Brinton. However, Lecesne has embraced the community that stemmed from his character, and those ripples of impact can be seen in his current play, *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*. "I saw what a story could do and how it could travel out into the world like a little satellite that you send out that can do the work," said Lecesne to the *New York Times* in 2015. "That, to me, is miraculous."



Flowers, flags, and signs left outside of the Stonewall Inn, in memory of the Pulse nightclub shooting victims.
Photo by Ryan McGrady.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why do you think that Leonard’s story is an important one to tell?
- Has someone ever made you/someone you care about feel like being “too much yourself” was a bad thing? If so, how do you believe you should respond?
- Do you believe that small acts of kindness can have a larger ripple effect? Why or why not?

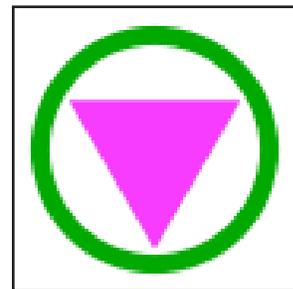
GLSEN: Making Schools Safer

By Ishaar Gupta

In 1990, a group of teachers from Massachusetts came together with the goal of lowering the tolerance for bullying in the educational system, specifically bullying that targeted LGBTQ students. Since then, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has risen to the forefront of national education organizations ensuring safe environments for students in the LGBTQ community. By conducting research, authoring resources, creating policies, and forming a network of scholars and advocates, GLSEN has made significant progress in making the world a better place for LGBTQ youth.

Starting with a local volunteer group of 70 gay and lesbian educators led by Kevin Jennings, a high school history teacher in Massachusetts, the group expanded to become a national organization in 1994. That same year, GLSEN helped launch the first LGBT History Month in October, with official proclamations from the governors of Connecticut and Massachusetts. Throughout the next 26 years, the group would conduct immense research, introduce LGBT-inclusive anti-bullying policies, and launch several awareness events, including the Day of Silence, a national day of action symbolizing the silencing effect of anti-LGBT bullying, No-Name-Calling Week, a week celebrating kindness, and Ally Week, which educates students about how to create safer and more inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth.

GLSEN has introduced several policies to ensure that schools take action to prevent LGBTQ-related bullying. Their signature legislation, the Safe Schools Improvement Act, requires all public K-12 schools to enact an anti-bullying policy that includes specific protections for bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity, while continuing to protect other categories such as race and religion. The Student Non-Discrimination Act prohibits discrimination in public schools based on these factors.



Many classrooms will display this symbol to show that it is a safe, inclusive space for all students.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Check out GLSEN’s website at www.glsen.org for ideas about how to make your school more inclusive for everybody.

As a voice in the field of public policy, GLSEN has also done much in combatting “No Promo Homo” laws—laws that stigmatize LGBTQ people in the classroom, often forbidding teachers from discussing gay and transgender issues in a positive light. For example, in Alabama, “classes must emphasize, in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state” (Alabama State Code 16-40A-2 (c) (8)). Currently, Alabama joins seven other states (Arizona,

Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah) that have enacted these kinds of laws, which are extremely harmful to the atmosphere of a given school.

GLSEN continues to be a voice for public school students in the LGBTQ community and shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. From its inception in 1990 to its most recent National School Climate Survey, GLSEN has empowered students, teachers, and legislators to enact change for LGBTQ students in order to create a more inclusive community.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why are organizations like GLSEN necessary?
- Why do you think bullying happens?
- Describe the atmosphere of your school. What are its strengths? Are there areas that need improvement?

Further Reading and Viewing

Compiled by Samantha Reser

If you enjoyed *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, or you want to explore similar topics further, here are some other media to look into:

PLAYS

***The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman**

One of the most popular plays about a gay character, *The Laramie Project* is a devised (collaboratively developed) play about the true story of the death of Matthew Shephard and the people in the town of Laramie, Wyoming. It is also available as a film.

***Angels in America* by Tony Kushner**

A play set in New York City in the 1980s about six characters coming to terms with their sexualities, their differences, and the AIDS crisis. It is also available as a mini-documentary.

***The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman**

Premiering in 1934, *The Children's Hour* was one of the early plays to address homosexuality. Trouble arises when a student at an all-girls school gets angry, runs away from school, and accuses the two headmistresses at the school of having an affair. It is also available as a film.

***RENT* with music, book and lyrics by Jonathan Larson**

A musical set in New York City in 1989 about diverse young adults struggling with the obstacles that race, sexuality, and poverty can bring. It is also available as a film.

***Hairspray* with music and lyrics by Marc Shaiman & Scott Wittman Book by Mark O'Donnell & Thomas Meehan**

A musical set in the 1960s with the theme of proudly standing out because of your differences. It is also available as a film and live broadcast.



James Lecesne in character as Gloria Salzano.
Photo by Matthew Murphy.

TELEVISION, FILMS AND DOCUMENTARIES

Trevor

A short film written by James Lecesne, playwright and actor of *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*. This film inspired The Trevor Project. It is available on The Trevor Project website, www.thetrevorproject.org.

The Out List

A documentary about LGBT celebrities of this generation. It is available on Netflix.

Steven Universe

A heartfelt cartoon about a young boy, Steven, who is raised by the Crystal Gems, three female aliens with superpowers. The show follows Steven's journey to discover his place in life, as well as how his family and friends learn and grow with him.

Billy Elliot

A film about a miner's son who, instead of following in his father's footsteps, learns to dance ballet. It was also adapted into a musical.

GBF

A lighthearted film that subverts the stereotype of the "gay best friend." It is available on Netflix.

Modern Family

A TV show that combats stereotypes for what a "normal" family should be. Issues of gender, sexual identity, parenthood, race, and family dynamics are often at the forefront of the episodes.

Cyberbully

A film made collaboratively with *Seventeen Magazine* that focuses on what can happen when someone is bullied through social media.

BOOKS

***Absolute Brightness* by James Lecesne**

The play is adapted from this book, which Lecesne published in 2008.

***Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli**

A story about a not out but gay teenager whose secrets are discovered by a fellow classmate who subsequently blackmails him.

***Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz**

A coming-of-age story about two teen boys with nothing in common, who establish a special friendship with each other anyway.

***Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher**

A teenage girl commits suicide, and she sends tapes to people in her life detailing the reasons why.

LOCAL RESOURCES:

True Colors, Inc.

30 Arbor Street #201a, Hartford, CT 06106
(860) 232-0050
www.ourtruecolors.org

ACLU of Connecticut

765 Asylum Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105
(860) 523-9146
www.acluct.org

Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective

1841 Broad Street, Hartford, CT 06114
(860) 278-4168
www.hglhc.org

Hartford PFLAG

(860) 785-0909
www.pflaghartford.org

Be You: Quotes on Identity

Nowadays, more celebrities are opening up about their insecurities and struggles with identity. Whether on the stage, screen, page, or the red carpet, many celebrities are fighting for a wider range of media representation to inspire people to be themselves. The following are all quotes from those in the past and present who used their fame as a platform for their message.

I try to keep it real. I don't have time to worry about what I'm projecting to the world. I'm just busy being myself.
—DEMI LOVATO

I always want to stay focused on who I am, even as I'm discovering who I am. —ALICIA KEYS

Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds. The mediocre mind is incapable of understanding the man who refuses to bow blindly to conventional prejudices and chooses instead to express his opinions courageously and honestly. —ALBERT EINSTEIN

When you become the image of your own imagination, it's the most powerful thing you could ever do.

—RUPAUL

The truth about a person's sexual preference is often revealed through a long journey of tiny steps, and acceptance is one of the last ones. It's tough to confront those things that you are afraid of in yourself. In your case, it will take time. Time and experience. But you will get there.

—NEIL PATRICK HARRIS

Why do we care so much about what other people think? All that matters is how you feel about yourself. That's all that matters. Everybody else has their own thing.
—CHRISSY METZ

There's just some magic in truth and honesty and openness.
—FRANK OCEAN

I think if you live in a black-and-white world, you're gonna suffer a lot. I used to be like that. But I don't believe that anymore. —BRADLEY COOPER

[But] if I don't speak up, I'm just going to what? Sit around and complain and hope that somebody else will? No. I wasn't raised like that. If I want change, then I've got to do it. And if I want to do it, I've got to be that change. And that takes sacrifices that sometimes don't pay the bills, you know? And I'm OK with that.

—GINA RODRIGUEZ

Don't spend all of your time trying to be like someone else because you can never be them and they can never be you.
—RAVEN-SYMONÉ

"May the Force be with you" is charming but it's not important. What's important is that you become the Force— for yourself and perhaps for other people.

—HARRISON FORD

You'll never find peace of mind until you listen to your heart.

—GEORGE MICHAEL

For me it's not an option at all. I don't want to be some straight girl in movies. I want to be doing what I want and using who I am authentically. —KATE MCKINNON

I've shamed myself for it. We shame each other online. We're always too skinny or too fat or too tall or too short. They're just confirming this feeling I have about myself. I'm trying to figure my body out. It bothers me because I care so much about young girls. We're shaming each other and we're shaming ourselves, and it sucks."

—EMMA STONE

Try and understand what part you have to play in the world in which you live. There's more to life than you know and it's all happening out there. Discover what part you can play and then go for it. —IAN MCKELLEN

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Be more concerned with your character than your reputation. Your character is what you really are, while your reputation is what others think of you. —JOHN WOODEN

If you feel like a weirdo, it's okay because weirdos rule the world.
—AUBREY PLAZA

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do celebrities have a responsibility to help their fans? If so, in what way?
- Do you have any celebrities that you look up to? What about them inspires you?
- Pick one of the quotes on this page and write about what the quote means to you. Can you relate to it personally? Do you know anyone who could use this advice?
- In reference to Leonard, Ellen says that he "changed all our lives" and "made us believe in goodness again." Do you have someone in your life- living or deceased- that has made such an impact on you? How?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Self-Portrait Collage

By adding together and layering various media, create a collage that shows who you are! You can use photographs, magazines, notes, fabric, or any other materials that you'd like. You can even draw, paint, or write on your "self-portrait." It does not need to look like you, but rather show different aspects of yourself and your personality. Who are you? What do you like? How do you define yourself?

Building a Character

Take a look at the article “Writer-Actor James Lecesne Morphs Into 9 of His Characters” by Boris Kachka. Using Lecesne’s descriptions of his characters, try to physicalize them. Make a circle with everyone facing outward (looking away from each other). As the teacher reads one of the descriptions aloud, create a statue of what you think the character looks like with your body. Have everybody turn around at the same time to show their interpretation of the character. Repeat for all characters. Once you’ve got the basic shape of the characters, try walking around the room as the characters. How do they walk? Do they move fast or slow? Do they acknowledge the other characters? Do they try to take up a lot of space or as little as possible? Reflect afterwards. Discuss how different actors can play the same characters in diverse ways. Why does this happen? What would it be like to play all of these characters in the same play?

For an added challenge, try writing your own imaginary character descriptions. Create and describe the distinct, physical appearance and habits of a character. Once written, trade with a classmate and physicalize each other’s characters.

Describing a Character

Throughout *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, the audience hears different things about Leonard from people who knew him, and must imagine who he is and what people thought of him from these descriptions alone. In this activity, you will be introduced to three fictional teens by reading a little about the people in their family, school, and community. Have each person read one of the character cards. Based on each character card, tell the rest of the group what you learned and what you might guess about the main character. You can expand upon the information in your card, but try to keep it realistic and true to the character. Then, as a group, write a character outline. Who do you think they are as a person? How do they affect the people around them? How do others see them differently? What might make them tick?

Hint: To use this as an activity for the whole class, you might want to copy these pages and cut out the individual cards.

JASON SPELLMAN

Jason is noticeably small for his age (15 years old), and he generally seems to be very shy. He is often teased about the fact that he looks so young and small.

VIEWPOINT #1

Mr. Douglas Kent, Jason’s US History Teacher

Jason built a large 3D model of the White House for a class project. It was incredibly detailed, down to the trim on every window and individual plants on the White House Lawn. Mr. Kent gave him an A+. Jason does very well on the tests and homework portion of the class, and he shows a good grasp of the material. He does not participate much in class though, which is hurting his overall grade in the course.

VIEWPOINT #2

Carly Spellman, Jason’s Older Sister

Carly is very popular. Like her brother, she is also small for her age, but it helps her as a “flyer” for the school cheerleading team. She dates Mike Hobbes, the captain of the basketball team. She is very bubbly and has lots of friends. She rolls her eyes when her friends mention her brother. She was also seen helping him carefully carry his White House model into school.

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VIEWPOINT #3**Mr. Al Moffat, Jason's Boy Scout Leader**

Jason is a member of his local Boy Scouts troop. He has worked his way up through the years and is now working on his Eagle Scout project, in which he will design and build a handicapped fishing pier for a local reservoir. His scoutmaster, Mr. Moffat, is helping him with the project. Mr. Moffat is a retired structural engineer, who lives nearby with his wife Elaine and their golden retriever, Annie. Elaine, who works part-time in a garden center, helped Jason figure out how to create realistic-looking grass for his White House project. Jason often spends time throwing a ball for Annie in the Moffat's backyard.

VIEWPOINT #4**Ed Spellman, Jason's father**

Ed Spellman is the owner of a local car dealership. He was popular when he was in high school, and now he is a very good salesman—charismatic and confident. He was thrilled when he found out his wife was expecting a baby boy (Jason), and he immediately ran out to buy a very small, baby-sized baseball mitt. His wife teased him about it, but he couldn't stop talking about the fun he was going to have with "his boy." In his free time, Mr. Spellman participates in a fantasy football league and an intramural soccer team. He signed Jason up to play with him, but Jason just stopped coming. Mr. Spellman discovered that Jason was spending time at the Moffat's house instead, working on his Eagle Scout project.

VIEWPOINT #5**Anne Spellman, Jason's mother**

Anne Spellman is an ER nurse at a busy area hospital. She generally works afternoons and evenings, getting home around the time that Jason and Carly are going to bed. Although she's gone most evenings, she always makes time to talk to each of her kids before bed, to hear how their day went. While he used to tell her about various events in his day, now Jason just says "it was fine."

ELEANOR MITCHELL

Eleanor is 17 years old and a member of the drama club. The kids at school call her "fat."

VIEWPOINT #1**Avery Mitchell, Eleanor's childhood best friend**

Avery and Eleanor used to be good friends when they were little. Around the time they hit middle school, Avery started to be interested in boys and make new friends. Always self-conscious about her weight, Eleanor had a hard time making new friends, and they drifted apart. Now that they're in high school, Eleanor and Avery travel in very different circles. The other day in gym class, Avery's friends were making fun of the fact that Eleanor's shirt had ridden up in the back, exposing bare skin and some of her underwear. Eleanor heard them and yanked her shirt down quickly. She looked close to tears. She met Avery's eyes, and Avery looked away quickly, saying nothing. Eleanor ran into the bathroom.

VIEWPOINT #2**Judy Mitchell, Eleanor's mother**

Judy works as a social worker. She cares very much for all of her clients and often spends time poring over their casefiles at home. She is a single mother, and she tries to make the best possible life for Eleanor and herself, although on her salary, there is no room for luxuries like travel or a college fund for Eleanor. The two are very close and often enjoy watching movies together on the couch with ice cream and popcorn. It has been a tradition since Eleanor's father left the family ten years ago. While picking Eleanor's room the other day, Judy found one of her notebooks under the bed. Someone had scrawled the word "Fatty" across the top of it in red Sharpie. Judy was stunned to see it.

VIEWPOINT #3**Melinda Thompson, Eleanor’s English teacher and Drama Club advisor**

Eleanor first joined drama club as a freshman, under Ms. Thompson’s advice. Although the girl had always seemed to be terribly shy, she noticed how intently Eleanor was watching the film version of *Romeo and Juliet* in English class. During rehearsals, Ms. Thompson kept finding her offstage, scribbling in a notebook. She was surprised to find that Eleanor was writing a play. She was even more surprised to find that it was a play about a girl who kills herself.

VIEWPOINT #4**Jackson James, a fellow student and member of the Drama Club**

Jackson and Eleanor became fast friends in 9th grade when they were assigned as lab partners. Both were outcasts—Eleanor for her weight, and Jackson for the fact that he was gay. Jackson was quickly won over by the elaborate, hilariously outlandish backstories Eleanor made up about the other students in class. Together, they commiserate about what it will be like to get away from their high school. Jackson has just been accepted to a prestigious college theatre program and is looking forward to moving to New York for school next year.

VIEWPOINT #5**Linda Hall, Volunteer Coordinator at the SPCA**

Eleanor has been volunteering at the SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) for the past year. Linda has been impressed by her hard work and calming presence on the dogs and cats in her care, particularly considering her young age. Many volunteers apply, thinking that they’ll just be playing with cute puppies and kittens all day, but then they leave when they find out it’s hard work. Eleanor, on the other hand, seems to thrive on the work. Linda offered Eleanor a paid summer internship for the coming summer. Eleanor thanked her and said she’d be away this summer. Linda asked where she was going, and Eleanor just answered, “Away.”

LUKE D’AGOSTINO

Luke is 17 years old, popular, and the captain of the school soccer team.

VIEWPOINT #1**Eric Hughes, Luke’s soccer coach**

Luke is one of the most naturally gifted soccer players Coach Hughes has ever seen. He is a hard worker, a smart student, and a spectacular player. He could go far – definitely playing in college, and probably even go professional after that. However, Luke refuses to talk about college any time Coach Hughes brings them up—even those with great scholarship opportunities. He has also started skipping practice in the last several weeks, and Coach has warned him that if he misses another practice, he’ll have to kick him off the team.

VIEWPOINT #2**Maddie Graham, Luke’s girlfriend**

Maddie is pretty and very sweet, but while she’s not an outcast, she’s also not terribly popular. She was more surprised than anyone when handsome, popular Luke D’Agostino asked her out last summer, when they were working together at the Ice Cream Palace. They’ve been together 8 months, and Luke has been a sweet, caring boyfriend. However, Luke has seemed distant and distracted over the past month or so. He’s missed several planned phone calls and forgot about one of their dates. Maddie is worried that he may be losing interest in her.

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VIEWPOINT #3**Officer Douglas O'Hara, police officer**

Officer O'Hara was out on routine patrol last Saturday night when he encountered a young man, Luke D'Agostino, repeatedly kicking and punching a metal garbage dumpster behind a Chinese restaurant. When Officer O'Hara approached Luke, he stopped what he was doing and sat down on the curb with his head in his hands, crying heavily. As there was no dramatic damage to the dumpster, the owner of the restaurant declined to press charges, and in fact, let Luke use the restroom to clean up the cuts on his knuckles. Officer O'Hara drove Luke home, where he was let off with a warning. As he spoke with Luke's father, Officer O'Hara observed a home care nurse in the front hallway.

VIEWPOINT #4**David Lim, owner of the Jade Garden Buffet Restaurant**

Luke D'Agostino started working for Mr. Lim 5 months ago as a bus boy. Mr. Lim has been very pleased with Luke's work—he is prompt, hard-working, and dependable. Last month, Luke asked if he could change his schedule a bit, because he needed to take care of his little sister. Although all employees have a strict "no cell phone" policy, Mr. Lim caught Luke on his phone in the back room last Saturday night. Luke seemed to be distressed by the call and asked if he could step outside to take a break for a minute. Ten minutes later, a police officer brought Luke back inside and said he'd been vandalizing the dumpster. Mr. Lim declined to press charges.

VIEWPOINT #5**Nick D'Agostino, Luke's father**

Six months ago, Luke's mother, Mary, was diagnosed with Stage 4 Ovarian Cancer. Although she initially responded well to treatment, her health has declined over the last six weeks, and on Friday, the family made the decision for her to come home from the hospital, so that she could die in her own bed. Luke's father is emotionally and physically exhausted from caring for his wife over the last several months. He has relied heavily on his son during this process, to help care for his little sister, to bolster his mother's spirits, and to help keep the family running, and Luke has been there every step of the way. Nick was stunned to find Luke with a police officer on his front step Saturday night.

Be the Difference: A Bystander Activity

Discuss the role that a bystander plays in bullying. Be sure to address the following questions:

- Do you believe a bystander can reduce bullying?
- Does a bystander have to be physically present at an event to intervene?
- Should you find yourself in the middle of a bullying event, do you think there is an ideal way to intervene?

Reminder: should a bystander choose to intervene, the bully's attention could be redirected towards them. As a class, brainstorm a list of ways that bystanders can help reduce bullying. Examples:

- Say something supportive to the victim.
- Tell a teacher or adult about what is happening.
- Delete and do not forward a text message or other social media message that could be hurtful.
- If you know someone who is being mean and feel comfortable talking to them, ask why they are acting this way and encourage them not to.

After brainstorming, make smaller groups. Within each group, select one way—either from the brainstormed list or a new group idea—that bystanders can help reduce bullying. Then, transform it into a creative message—through a song/rap, poster, skit, or poem. The goal in creating each message is to inspire others to take positive bullying bystander action to become an ally. Have each group share creative messages for the

class. Reflect afterwards and discuss the process of creating the messages. Be sure to address the following questions:

- What types of creative delivery were used?
- Did you find one type of creative delivery to be stronger than the others? Why/why not?
- Would you be comfortable intervening if you see something mean happening? Why? Why not?
- Do you believe bullying can be prevented? If so, how?

Posters for Change: A Visual, Anti-Bullying Campaign

Using any art supplies you have, work together in groups to create a campaign poster for an anti-bullying campaign. Before beginning designs, come up with one campaign slogan (i.e. “Bullying Breaks Hearts” or “Don’t Stand By...Stand Up!”). Once each group has decided on a slogan, design a poster to be displayed in your school hallways. Have each group share their campaign poster with the class. Reflect with a discussion that includes the following: Why did you choose to create your poster the way you did? Having observed other campaign posters, do any of them offer different ideas that you’d like to incorporate in upcoming campaigns? Did you base your poster off of personal experiences? What did you want people to think when viewing your poster? Was there an overall message?

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