

## How Art Saved My Life

By Tony Babin

Adolescence is a hard time for all of us. I know I had it rough. At 16 I was a 350-pound fat kid with bad acne whose only friends were girls. I sucked at sports, but excelled in choir and the Forensics Team. I had won every tournament the Forensics Team went on in my category of "Dramatic Interpretation." I was religious. I was a junior deacon, a member of the church choir, and often the featured soloist for Sunday sermons. My grandmother's favorite was my rendition of "How Great Thou Art."

I also had a terrible secret. I was gay. Of course, at that age and in that time in a small farm town, I wasn't sure of what that was. I just knew I was different and that all the jocks in school called me a fag.

I remember our church hosting what was called "The Lay Witness Mission," which was basically lay church members giving testimonials. It was a revival of sorts. On the last Sunday, we were told to write on a piece of paper something in your life you want to change. We were then to lay that piece of paper on the altar and then they led us in a group prayer that was supposed to address the piece of paper. I wrote "I am a queer" on my piece of paper and folded it about eight times to make sure no one else would see it, and I left it on the altar and prayed. I prayed hard. I asked God to show me a sign. I was only 16.

I waited and waited for some kind of answer from God. After a few weeks, I decided that there was no answer. I became depressed and started thinking about suicide a lot.

Then, one Monday in school, our choir teacher told us that we would be participating in the entertainment tent when the Art Train came to town. Yes! The Art Train was coming to our town!! For those of you who don't know what that is, the Art Train was a project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. A train was loaded up with masterpiece works of art and then it toured the country stopping in small towns across America for farm kids and migrant workers to experience and see. Our whole town was abuzz! My speech teacher convinced me to sign up to do stand-up comedy and dramatic monologues. I did.

There I was, a 16-year-old fat gay kid with pimples standing up on a makeshift stage in a tent doing a monologue from "Death of a Salesman" and looking out into a crowd of strangers who were crying. Later, as I was telling jokes, those strangers were laughing.

It is hard to describe the feeling I felt as I stood in that dark room sharing laughter and tears with a crowd of strangers.

When it was my turn to board the train and see the artwork, I was filled with excitement and a sense of awe. As I walked down the corridors looking at the beautiful works, I was stopped by a reproduction of Michelangelo's painting "Creation of Man." I stood there for a long time with tears in my eyes until they eventually ran down my cheeks. It was one of the most emotion-stirring paintings I had ever seen. I am not sure why it touched me the way it did at that time. I was so afraid someone would see me crying in front of a painting and my big secret would be out. I looked to my right, and there was a little old lady with white hair and a lace collar. She was crying too. She looked over at me and said, "Isn't it beautiful?" and handed me a tissue from her purse. She then took my hand and patted it and walked on down the corridor.

At that moment I could see my destiny before me very clearly. I knew that I would move to a bigger town, become an actor, and all thoughts of suicide and being different and not fitting in seemed not to matter so much.

It wasn't until years later that I realized why that particular painting had touched me so deeply. And it wasn't until years later that I realized that the Art Train was the sign from God I was waiting for.

Now, whenever I see a news story about arts funding being cut from schools and art programs being dropped or dismissed as not being a necessary part of the curriculum, I can't help but get sad. Somewhere, there is an overweight teenager who feels like a misfit, whose only hope of feeling a part of something is being taken away. Art has the power to heal, to change lives, to answer prayers, to make us all feel like we are part of the Cosmic Dance. Art is more important than any sporting event can ever hope to be.

Art saved my life.