

## EXPERIENCE—DEBRA BARSHA, NEW YORK, N.Y. LEARNING HOW TO LIVE HER DREAM

**After struggling to find her way as a musician, Debra Barsha learns the importance of winning in every part of her life.**

I was 13 when I started writing songs. By 15, I had my first song published. As I grew up, I became a classical pianist and majored in music theory at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. In 1978, I moved to New York City and began my career singing and playing piano in piano bars and writing and singing jingles. Eventually, after I left a rock-and-roll tour in 1984, I moved to Los Angeles and commuted back and forth to New York for various gigs.

A friend, Nancy, whom I stayed with on one of my trips to New York in 1987, introduced me to the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I could see that something very profound had changed in Nancy, and I knew it had to do with her Buddhist practice. After much conflict, internal and external, I broke down and asked her, "What is this chanting thing about?" She asked me if I wanted to chant with her and I said yes. I felt something extraordinary when I was facing the Gohonzon and chanting with my best friend sitting next to me. So much so that on Feb. 21, 1987, I received the Gohonzon. I was later able to introduce my two sisters and my parents to the practice.

While living in Los Angeles, I began complaining about my career and not being able to get this or that break in show business. A fellow SGI-USA member told me, "Debra, it may already be your karma to be successful in your career, but who knows if it's your karma to be a great human being." Not exactly what I wanted to hear. But he was right. I had to ask myself, "How do I become a great human being?" And more specifically, "How do I use the gift I have to become a great human being and inspire others to use their gifts to do the same?"

In 1993, two big things happened to me. One: I was asked to be the composer of a show called "Radiant Baby" about the life of Keith Haring, the late artist. And two: I was out of work. I was tired of doing odd day jobs in between gigs, and had to really think about what I wanted to do next. I started to feel old (I was 35!) and although I was sober (I'd since given up drugs and alcohol), I felt like I was in a depression. I went on unemployment for the first time in my life and decided to take time off to just figure out what I wanted to do. I was chanting, but not much. I always kept my altar nice and knew the practice undoubtedly worked, but I was in a slump. Deep down I knew—things had to change.

I was inspired by the prospect of composing "Radiant Baby" because I had lived through that time period and had actually seen the New York City subway drawings that Keith Haring had created with chalk on blank movie posters. It was also a thrilling time, because the lyricist/book writer Ira Gasman had a show coming out on Broadway and I was honored to be the next composer he worked with. But I had no money.

I accepted a part-time job two days a week in a private school in Brooklyn teaching first grade music and fourth grade drama. At the time, I thought: "Oh, great, another day job. How am I going to be able to have the time to compose this show, be a teacher and support myself?"

However, what happened was I would be totally depressed before I left the house in the

morning, but when I stepped into the classroom and saw those first-grade faces beaming at me, I was immediately out of my depression. I realized that in first grade, children are at an amazingly formative age where a first experience of music can determine if they continue with it or not. I started to think about my dreams as a child of becoming a great singer/songwriter and I longed to have the same excitement about music again that these kids had.

I remembered reading something by SGI President Ikeda that said that this practice is about giving 100 percent wherever you are at whatever you are doing. I realized that my job as a part-time teacher was something I had just been holding onto until “something” happened in my life as an artist. So, I decided that my entire life was my art. I was not going to wait on something to happen, I would make it happen. Amazingly enough, as I started researching Keith Haring, I found out that all his life, even up to the moment of his death, he felt that his mission was to make art accessible to children. I started to see that this project came to me for a reason at this time in my life.

Once we were further along with the production, and after a few readings, we decided that a new book writer had to be brought in. The replacement was a friend of mine, Stuart Ross, whom I had also introduced to Buddhism. Stuart’s first idea: “Let’s have children in it,” he said. Right then and there I realized, “This is what all my chanting to be a great teacher has come to.” I now knew exactly how to write for and work with kids. By determining not to compartmentalize my life, my art had found its way.

We were given the opportunity to have a reading of our new script at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, a place perfect for our production. On top of that, the head of the theater attended the reading. He was blown away and came up to me at the end of the reading and said, “You have a home at the Public Theater if you want it.”

The obstacles came almost immediately. Now that the piece was going to be produced, we needed the rights from the Keith Haring Foundation, and we knew this would not be easy. Ira, who had brought me the idea, was very sick, and we had to renegotiate our collaboration agreement. This was also a bad time for the Public Theater because their two most recent musicals had lost millions of dollars.

During this time, with the encouragement of my boyfriend, I resolved to have these business conflicts rectified. I was determined to get “Radiant Baby” produced, and produced now. I renewed my Buddhist practice, started doing a consistent morning and evening gongyo, and made sure that I chanted at least one hour a day until we got a commitment for the show. I was going to do whatever I could.

We received the contract from the Keith Haring Foundation for the rights to use his work, and they are totally behind the project. We also received a written commitment from the Public Theater, despite the fact that there is supposedly no musical theater department there. Everyone at the theater has been completely supportive of my job as a teacher. We’ve even scheduled readings and developmental meetings around my teaching schedule.

I truly believe that if you stand up for and are proud of what you do, you can find the true artist within.

Thanks to my Buddhist practice, I have been able to work with others and grow beyond my expectations. I am determined to continue to win in every area of my life and inspire others to do the same. Thanks to Buddhism, that dream can become a reality. For this I am forever grateful.