

Kalina Isato

Looking for "It"

I wanted to win the Henri David female impersonation contest because I wanted to prove I could walk the walk with the best of them. I was straight; that proved a disadvantage in the world of drag and female impersonation. For reasons I couldn't fathom at the time, I was missing something that was fundamental to gay culture. You couldn't find it in the conservative businessman with a house, a car, and 2.5 kids. You couldn't find it in the local donut shop or the hardware store. You won't even find it in many of the conservative gays in Philadelphia, the very ones who would dare laugh at drag queens with disgust.

Concerning the plight of the gay man in Philadelphia, my gay friend Zak bluntly remarked, "I don't know what it is with gay men in Philadelphia. They're all too conservative. They don't like fabulous things. I would go up to them and say, 'Look, you're a faggot. You're supposed to be more accepting of this stuff!'"

If you want to achieve anything in life, you have to possess a certain set of skills, a certain amount of guts, and a certain amount of luck. You can't achieve a goal without some prior knowledge about what it is you're after. In order to win a contest, you have to outdo everyone else in the contest. You have to "beat" everyone. You have to have a certain something that separates you from the rest of the pack.

In other words, you have to have "it."

Some self-proclaimed fabulous people have "it." Most do not, but these people would like to think that they do.

I knew I didn't have "it" yet. Like the self-proclaimed fabulous people, I could pretend to have "it," but that wouldn't help my situation when it came time to walk the walk with the best of them.

I had already proven to myself that I could beat the foreign students in any college class. I always thought of myself as a good representative of the American educational system. A lot of foreigners consider American schools to be fluff, but I am always quick to defend the American school system. A lot of these foreign students would choke if they saw what I had to endure in high school: getting up at 6:30am to take a one hour train ride to school, having to change two trains in between, taking 10 subjects in one semester, at least eight in one day, holding a high position in a club and an organized sport, and coming home at 5:30pm every single day.

The lazy students got booted out of my high school very quickly. My high school also had a very large percentage of Black Americans, about 80%. To most of them, they knew that Brooklyn Technical High School was their key to getting the hell out of their lower income situations. Even the slackers in my high school had more dedication than the kids in my neighborhood. That's why 97.5% of my graduating class of 1,039 went on to college. That is an astounding percentage for an American high school. Remember, these people were mostly minorities coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, the ones who truly gave a damn and got out of their bad situations.

I didn't come from a lower income situation like most of my friends in high school, but I did have my very own set of goals: I had already proven that I could get my graduate school degree by the age of 21. I had already proven that my music could get played along with the best of the dance songs out there. I had already shown myself as a "big sister"-type to dozens of novice crossdressers.

These are a few of the personal goals I had set out to achieve. My dedication helped me achieve each and every goal I set out to accomplish. In each case, I had what it took to achieve that goal. In each case, I had "it."

Go Ahead, Knock Me Down!

Asian mothers love to compare their kids with one another. Some liked boasting more so than others. My mother never got a chance to boast. All of her friends had kids that went to Ivy League colleges straight from high school. My mother would call me "stupid," "an idiot," "awful," "horrible," and an "Ivy League reject" while I was in

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college and prior. This was all before I entered the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League school, as a graduate student straight from a brilliant set of achievements at Boston University.

Then the bitch shut up. And, when I made Penn, I even told her to shut up.

This usually wouldn't bode too well with her or any other Asian parents, but I think this one time, this very one time, she knew I was right and sought my forgiveness in her own way... by shutting up and not retaliating. It was comforting to see that she was not making a comeback such as, "All of my friends have sons and daughters who are better than you," which she used to say to me countless times all throughout my college career and prior. There was no truth to her statement. I'm not sure she actually knew this or whether or not she ever regretted saying it.

These days, when confronting her with the negative remarks and statements she had made, she would deny ever having said them. Maybe it's the Chinese way. Maybe it's her own fucked-up way. I do not know. I told all of this to a Black woman who shared the same "traditional" methods of raising her children and she responded, "Don't you see her point? Your mother made you a fighter. Every time you get knocked down and fall, you just get right back up and keep on fighting. She toughened you."

It was true. There were a couple of points in my life in which I felt quite worthless because I couldn't get something done right or in the way that I wanted. Only after much focus and dedication did I finally achieve those goals. The Black woman was right. My mother did mold me into a fighter. You can chop me down, but I'll piece myself back together and come back fighting. Any other kid would've jumped off a bridge by now.

My mother said all of her evil things again and again, so many times that I almost believed her. Still, I had a personal set of goals to achieve. I knew that the schools I attended were top-notch: Mark Twain Junior High School "for the gifted and talented," Brooklyn Technical High School, and Boston University. Mark Twain was probably the second best junior high school in all of New York City, right behind Hunter.

Mark Twain students were chosen from the cream of the crop elementary school students from all over Brooklyn. Each entering class had about 200 students and 30 of them were always from my elementary school. Any Mark Twain student who took the aptitude test to get into one of the top three science high schools, Peter Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, or Brooklyn Tech, had a 99% chance of being accepted. Any Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, or Brooklyn Tech student who took the SAT and had grades of at least 85% basically got into the college of his or her choice.

Students in other high schools hated us. They thought we were overrated. Brooklyn Tech was not located in a particularly safe area, so amid the bullies, competing high school kids, and guns, I managed to get my education and got out of Brooklyn with my head and ass intact. Only once have I gotten "mugged" and that was when a high school bully demanded a quarter from me in my first year there. Other than that, I have never been mugged, beaten, or bullied in New York City and you can bet that I got around the city quite a bit via the subway. Sometimes, after school, I would venture up into Manhattan and walk the busy streets, visiting my favorite stores. A scrawny little kid like me should've gotten beat up and bullied a lot, but I didn't.

Why didn't I get kicked around by bigger, meaner kids every day? For some odd reason, word got around my high school of 5,000 students that I was some kind of martial arts master. I still have absolutely no idea how that rumor got started. Back then, Bruce Lee was mega-popular and he was a small, scrawny guy like me. Perhaps because of this, nobody dared challenge me.

I even had the gall to start a martial arts club. I got real students of the martial arts to teach the classes in my club. I taught a basic warmup exercise class, but that was it. I always hung around much larger friends, so people probably assumed that they were my bodyguards.

There were too many times when I had confrontations outside of school. The neighborhood kids would start chasing after a few of us with baseball bats and jack wrenches and we would run for dear life. I developed incredible speed this way and have outrun many potentially negative influences. The funny thing is I made the track team in both high school and college because of these "workouts." The martial arts club and my running ability had

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kept a scrawny little guy like me from getting beaten up. I knew too many scrawny guys who got beaten up every day. I was determined not to be one of them.

On Being Goal-Oriented

All throughout my life, I have been very goal-oriented. I was voted "Most Likely to Succeed" in my graduating class of 1,039 students. To me, this honor was worth more than the little piece of paper that said, "Brooklyn Technical High School Diploma with Honors" on it. I never got a school ring out of graduating. Everyone else I knew had parents who bought them school rings as a graduation present. Even the poor kids. My father always promised me one, but never got it. In junior high, he told me to wait until high school. In high school, he said wait until college. In college, he said wait until graduate school. Well, I earned Master's degrees from two graduate schools and never received a school ring. Oh, well.

I have two "claims to fame" in computer programming that I'm very proud of. At the age of 15, I got an article of mine published in a computer magazine with worldwide distribution. The royalties off of the millions of copies sold earned me my first \$1,000. I had spent a mere two hours writing that article and the accompanying program for it!

The second achievement? While in high school, I dreamed of working for a videogame company eventually. I wanted to work for Infocom, the once great adventure game company. I fulfilled that goal in college by working for Infocom as a programmer. I was the one who wrote the graphics interpreter for the Commodore Amiga computer. Now, that was being goal-oriented!

However, the one goal I sought after in college above all else was to achieve as many honors and distinctions as I could. I was very competitive, but was still considered a relaxed easy-going guy. I remember this one Asian guy named Kai who had a straight "A" (4.0) average in both computer science and engineering. He was going for two separate Bachelor's degrees in two different schools at Boston University.

Kai's dedication got him accepted to the most prestigious graduate schools in the country: Harvard, MIT, Carnegie Mellon, Berkeley, Princeton, you name it. He got into every one. He chose Berkeley because he loved the San Francisco area.

Kai didn't like American students. He thought most Americans were stupid. I was an American and he knew this, but he never outwardly laughed at me. We would take classes together and my grades would closely match his. I think this may have bruised his ego at times, to think that an American student can match the "number six student" in all of Hong Kong (this is an exalted honor in Hong Kong and pretty much places the student in a god-like status). Kai was obnoxious in a passive way. His hands were always shaking, though, so I had always wondered about that.

But back to my competitiveness. I wanted to make myself stand out in some way, so I knew that there was only one honor that would make me unique among all of the other graduate school applicants from my school or any school, the one honor that says you are the very best at your scholarly pursuits, the very best in your school, the one honor that you can't apply for, but must be nominated for.

That honor was Phi Beta Kappa and I had achieved that, too. I consider that honor to be greater than the piece of paper that said, "Boston University Master of Arts," on it. Hell, I would've given up both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees for a Phi Beta Kappa certificate if I had to. And, just to show Kai a thing or two, even with a 4.0 GPA, Kai didn't make Phi Beta Kappa. He was missing other requirements to achieve this distinction. Goal-oriented.

Anything computer-oriented, I can pick up right away. Anything artistic-oriented, I can pick up right away. I'd like to think that the left and right sides of my brain are working in perfect harmony. Computers and art. Computers and music. Desktop book publishing. Maybe I can bill myself as some sort of multimedia guru.

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Whenever I talked about composing music without any prior knowledge of music theory, people kept telling me to "leave it to the professional musicians." I told them, "No, I could make music, too," and I did. I produced two dance music albums, registered with the Copyrights office. I have sold many copies, but haven't made my money back on them yet. Although they are not technical achievements in any sense of the word, they are personal goals fulfilled. I produced them myself. I wanted to prove that anyone can produce an album with a little bit of time and a lot of enthusiasm. Yes, there are a couple of songs off of each album that are awesome. Goal-oriented.

I was very thin (118 pounds) up until the age of 21 when I decided enough was enough. I did something about it. Guided by my very own theories and principles, I went to the gym and learned about proper diet and nutrition from books and magazines. I studied everything I could and discarded the fluff. I built myself up to a rock solid 155 pounds. That's 37 pounds of awesome muscle that made my tiny girly-man physique look Herculean by comparison. I added five inches to my chest, inches to my arms and legs, and increased my stamina immensely. I did it all by myself. No steroids. No personal trainers. No advice from anyone but myself. Me, me, ME!!! See photo 3e of me at 155 in the photo gallery. Positively goal-oriented.

And, finally, about female impersonation, people who claimed to be experts on the subject have told me point blank that I couldn't do it.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because you're not gay."

"You don't have to be gay!" I remarked. Admittedly, it was the most off-beat thing any heterosexual man could do. And I showed them all by winning the "Most Beautiful Female Impersonator" award at the 1995 Henri David Hallowe'en Ball in Philadelphia. As you will read later, I beat over 60 contestants to win that title. Like I said, I was undoubtedly goal-oriented.

Do not for once think that I am some sort of an anal retentive, overachieving, neat freak. I'm not. Not in the very least. In fact, I will reveal to you right now that, for a very long time, I was a lazy ass in high school. I literally slept through a lot of my classes because I was bored sick of school. High school, even with 10 subjects per semester, was just not challenging to me.

One day, about a year before graduating high school, I just woke up and thought about my situation for a week. I knew I didn't want to stay in my hometown forever. In order to get out of a dump like Brooklyn, I knew I had to have the will to succeed. I laid out a plan that I was going to carry out for the next five years. It described everything that I was going to accomplish in that period of time. From that point on, I made the following my motto:

*Climb the highest mountain, reach its peak,
Build a mighty rocketship... and soar higher!*

I achieved everything I had set my heart on in that plan. You've read about some of my accomplishments in this section. If you are a lazy ass and/or will admit that you are one, then it is time to get off your butt and adopt my motto, because you can achieve all of your dreams, too.

A New Dance Club Called Paragon Central

On September 2, 1995, I kept thinking to myself again and again, "You should've gone to Lady Bunny's Wigstock in New York City," but Mary wasn't feeling up for it. Wigstock is the East Coast's biggest Labor Day weekend party for drag queens of all persuasions. Mary said, "Maybe next year." No matter. We would go to the Big Apple another time. I convinced Mary that we should go out, though, as practice for the upcoming contest.