

Be My Guest! An Interview with Nili Yelin, Jack of all Trades, Master of Many

I met Nili Yelin at a fall CWIP (Chicago Women in Publishing) meeting. After hearing her introduce herself, I knew that I wanted to learn more about her and about her insights.

Nili is known for many things, one of which is Storybook Mom, where she is a professional children's storyteller, actress, and voice-over performer. She is also an acting teacher at the Actors Training Institute, an independent marketing consultant for small businesses and performers, and the Marketing Director for the Wilmette Theatre. She has been performing professionally for 30 years and in marketing for 10 of those years.

Performing has led to many diverse paths in Nili's work life. She has blended her work and personal life together so that she is always working and rarely feels like her "work" is work because she has always followed her "passion".

Her biggest lesson is that work begets more work, and she likes to challenge herself to learn new things, saying, "If I think I can't do something, or it scares me, I will take the plunge and say 'YES' to the opportunity, and it has always led to growth and new paths".

As John Lennon said "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." Especially in these times, Nili has found that constantly having to adapt and create her own work opportunities is the greatest strength and skill she has in her bag of tricks.

In any of her work situations Nili has always suggested ideas, taken on more than the role required and created a synergy between her employer and herself to break out of the box and look at how we to take things to a new level. She always asks how are an organization is unique and different from similar organizations and what they offer that others don't.

She always has a personal stake in the work she does and that is what gives her the drive and energy to pursue it full out. She likes an interactive work environment and thrives on challenges and finding creative ways to make things happen.

Because Nili works in the creative arts, most of the business planning she has done is around creating something from nothing, having an idea and then planning out the steps to make it happen. The creation is what propels her to the actual tangible product or production. She takes into consideration costs, budgets, what she needs to make the endeavor break even (at the very least) and how it can be most profitable for all involved. Coming from the performer's perspective makes her a better "producer" or money person as she knows both sides and the needs and dreams of the people involved—the human capital is the most important element in all of her work.

It's about balance, Nili tells me. "Having come from an 'actor mentality', which is to always jump at any opportunity to perform and to be wanted after mainly rejection (which is the way it mostly is as a person in the arts) I have finally learned after years of experience, trial and error, flops and huge successes, that I need to weigh the balance between the need to earn a living and the desire to pursue my art. I no longer say 'YES' to everything and have to take time to look at the bigger picture and to also break things into manageable, attainable next steps. That said, sometimes, I am so busy performing that I don't give myself the time to breathe, reassess, and figure out what I need to do to take things to the next level."

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Though the economy and its personal impact on her work has created more obstacles this past year she has now learned that struggle, frustration and uncertainty give birth to new ideas and projects and that by keeping going, one step forward, two back sometimes, she is still ultimately moving forward. “I am working on taking my ideas and creating a ‘product’ to sell. I perform storytelling, I teach acting, I write shows and books, and I also ‘produce’ live theatre events. Through having to get the word out I learned to market myself and then shared my methods with others who have then hired me to market their businesses.”

Every work opportunity Nili has had has come from personal connection. If she traces it back it goes like this:

I loved theatre since I was little and on the recommendation of my high school guidance counselor applied to Northwestern University as a theatre major. I graduated from there with the Excellence in Theatre Award and after a senior class workshop with Charles Nelson Reilly who told me that I should go to New York and study with Stephen Strimpell at HB Studios, I did just that. I found my first apartment from a student in that acting class as well as a temp job at Warner Brothers which led to a job at a ‘new music channel’ being planned which became MTV. I performed and wrote for the channel and worked with some very creative people who have gone on to big film and television careers.

I also had some friends from Northwestern join the cast of Saturday Night Live, and they invited me up to see the offices and have lunch. The casting director came by, and they introduced me to her. She asked if I wanted to work on the show as an extra (background player) and that Lily Tomlin was hosting. I said yes and stayed nine seasons. During that time I started doing stand-up comedy and on a trip back out to Chicago re-met a guy from Northwestern days and ended up relocating, getting married and having children.

So my plan to become a famous Broadway-based, serious, actress led to comedy and television and now to living in a suburb in the Midwest.

The one thing that has been the plan through all the twists and turns is Nili’s passion for words, performing and facing new challenges. She also let go of her “fantasy” of what her life would be like and came to embrace the reality that she actually performs more now than she ever did in New York and that she has created her own niche and living through her love of acting and the way it can connect all of us to the human experience.

Nili reminds me, “To thine own self be true”*that is a good plan especially when plans change.*

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