



In Real Life: My Journey to a Pixelated World

By Joey Graceffa

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A confessional, uplifting memoir from the beloved YouTube personality.

It's not where you begin that matters.

It's where you end up.

Twenty-three year old Joey Graceffa has captured the hearts of millions of teens and young adults through his playful, sweet, and inspirational YouTube presence (not to mention his sparkling eyes and perfect hair). Yet, Joey wasn't always comfortable in his skin, and in this candid memoir, he thoughtfully looks back on his journey from pain to pride, self-doubt to self-acceptance.

To his fans, Joey is that best friend who always captures the brighter side of life but also isn't afraid to get real. In the pages of his first book, he opens up about his years of struggling with family hardships and troubles at school, with cruel bullying and the sting of rejection. He tells of first loves and losses, embarrassing moments and surprising discoveries, loneliness, laughter, and life-changing forks in the road, showing us the incalculable value of finally finding and following your true passion in this world. Funny, warm-hearted, and inspiring, Joey Graceffa's story is a welcome reminder that it's not where you begin that matters, but where you end up.

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Editorial Review

Review

"If this isn't bravery, we don't know what is."

(Teen Vogue)

"Fun, lighthearted, and touching" *(The Daily Beast)*

"In Real Life is not only an eye-opening read, it's a good reminder to young adults that they don't really know the people they follow on YouTube or Instagram as well as they think they do. What happens "In Real Life" is a more complicated story." *(Metro)*

About the Author

Joey Graceffa is one of the leading content creators and actors on YouTube. His memoir, *In Real Life: My Journey to a Pixelated World*, was published in 2015 and became an instant *New York Times* bestseller. Joey ranked third on *Variety*'s 2015 #Famechangers list and has been featured in *People*, *Forbes*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*. In 2013, Joey produced and starred in his own Kickstarter-funded supernatural series, *Storytellers*, for which he won a Streamy Award, and in 2016, he debuted *Escape the Night*, a surreality competition series for YouTube Red for which he won a second Streamy Award. For more information, please visit ChildrenofEdenBook.com.

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In Real Life

Introduction

Hello there, everyone! Well, I suppose it's just you! Hello there, you. Welcome to my first book. If you aren't familiar with me already, my name is Joey Graceffa. I'm twenty-four years old, and I make a living posting videos online. (Don't worry, they're the classy kind =P.) Whether you are a casual viewer or one of my devoted psychopaths, good to see ya again. Anyway, this is the story of my life so far. I get that it's kind of odd for someone my age to be writing a memoir, but I feel some responsibility to help inspire and comfort anyone out there who is facing challenges similar to those that I went through. There's a saying I like to live by: It's not about where you start but how you finish. I think it's important to take your experiences and grow from them rather than become a victim of your circumstances. Nothing productive comes from that mind-set.

While writing this book, I learned a lot more about myself, and as hard as it was to relive many moments that I wish could stay buried in my head, in the end it's therapeutic for me to release this information into the world.

I have kept a giant part of my life hidden for many reasons, and in this book I'm finally going to let it all hang out while giving you a deeper glimpse into all the crazy experiences that have gotten me to where I am today. If there is one thing I hope you and all my other readers can take away from my story, it is to know

you're not alone. As much as you feel that no one in the world knows what you're going through, chances are you're wrong. (If you're an alien reading this, I'm sorry. No one here can relate to you.) But for real, I can't tell you how many times I felt so alone growing up and kept all of my feelings inside. It was not healthy. In no way am I trying to complain about my life, though. I accept that I had a different upbringing than most other people have, but it's made me into the man I am today and I wouldn't change a thing. So without further damn ado, here's everything that's happened so far "In Real Life."|In Real Life

Chapter 1

Josephina, the Friendless Dunce

I wish I could remember if the lead paint chips that I ate as a child were satisfying to my curious, bored one-and-a-half-year-old self. Maybe they tasted so good that swallowing them was worth the torture they caused all the way through high school.

Somehow I doubt it. The way my mom tells it, we were living in an old apartment complex in my hometown of Marlborough, Massachusetts, a small city about forty-five minutes outside Boston best known for literally nothing. Well, that's not exactly true. A lot of shoes were manufactured there for soldiers during the Civil War. I also used to think that the cigarettes were named after the town, but I was wrong.

Anyway, my parents hadn't divorced yet (that fun news wouldn't come until one year later), so at the time, it was my mom, my dad, my older sister Nicole, and me living at home. We had an enclosed back porch that we used as our playroom, and I'd sit in front of the windows, doing my fat wobbly toddler thing, pushing around colored blocks and Fisher Price Little People. The paint on the sills was peeling and chipped, and since the windows were often open, the breeze would blow flakes of paint onto my toys. My mom isn't sure how many weeks I'd been ingesting the poison, but when she finally walked in and found me going to town on a bunch of little white flecks, she snatched me up and rushed me to the doctor to get tested for lead poisoning.

A normal nontoxic amount of lead in a child's system is under 10 micrograms. According to my blood test, I had 59 micrograms! Math isn't my strong suit (thank you, paint chips), but I'm pretty sure that's almost SIX TIMES the recommended maximum. The doctors weren't really sure how it was going to affect me, but the big fear was that I would have brain damage. In truth, I'm lucky that I didn't end up with anything more severe than a learning disability, though that's not how it would feel while I was dealing with its repercussions for the next twenty years of my life.

From the start of preschool, I had a hard time acquiring basic skills like reading and simple math. My mother had me tested, and the results qualified me for special education classes. I didn't fully understand what that meant for the first couple of years of elementary school. At a certain point each day, I'd leave my regular class to go to another one, and I knew that it was a different sort of program, because the other students in it acted differently from the ones in my regular classes. This one—we called it SPED (special education) for short—was mostly made up of a lot of really hyper kids with ADHD (that's attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), troublemakers, and a few kids with Down syndrome. Looking back, I find it highly strange that the school just lumped everyone with learning difficulties into one class, regardless of their specific educational needs. But the material was taught much more slowly than in the regular class, and it was easier for me to understand.

Though none of us were fully aware of the reason we were together, all of us special education kids were

friends. I grew especially close to a girl named Taylor who had mild ADHD. One day while playing tag during recess, I told her that she reminded me of a mouse, and she got really offended. But I'd called her that because she was small, and her pretty yellow hair reminded me of Pipsy the Mouse from my favorite video game at the time, Diddy Kong Racing. She quickly forgave me once I explained myself, and we started becoming friends.

While we probably had fewer challenges than the other kids in the class, we were still pretty different from our regular classmates. One day we saw a kid in the hallway who had a broken leg, and he was swinging himself around on crutches. We thought it looked cool and fun, like he was some sort of robot acrobat, so after school, we rushed over to Taylor's house, where there was a trampoline. We spent the entire rest of the day leaping as high as we could and then aiming to land at the edge so we'd fall off and break our legs and get to have crutches too. Luckily for us, her dad eventually came home and made us stop before we could do any permanent damage.

It wasn't until around third grade that I started to realize other kids at school made fun of the special education program. That was about the time that I got really good at sneaking down the hallway to get to my classes, and I thought no one knew that I went to them.

But in fifth grade, the truth came out, and that's when the bullying really began. One day, class was over and we were lined up at the door waiting for the bell to ring. A kid named Kevin suddenly called out to me. "Hey, Joey, you getting ready to go to SPED with the other retard?"

I blushed a deep red. "No. What are you even talking about?"

"Come on, everyone knows," he said. The bell rang, and we all filed out into the hallway. "Look," he said, pointing to a fellow SPED classmate who was on her way to class—a girl named Jackie with Down syndrome. "You can walk Jackie there!" Jackie looked over at me, waiting to see if I would join her.

To this day, I'm ashamed of my response. "I don't even know that girl," I said and took off in the opposite direction. I ended up hiding in an alcove under a stairwell until well after the bell rang, just to make sure no one saw me going to the wing of the school where our classes were held.

In school, most kids want nothing more than to fit in. I hated the idea that my peers thought less of me because I was considered "stupid." It was embarrassing. But, really, I was my own toughest critic. I cared so much about what other people thought that it began to influence the way I thought about myself. I began to believe that I was less of a person because I had a disability. I knew that I had to change something because of the effect SPED had on my self-esteem, but it would be years before I was able to do anything about it. For the time being, I just made sure to go out of my way to take a really complicated route to get to class, trying my hardest to keep that part of my life secret.

But it was too late. Other kids knew, and I was ostracized more and more. In the cafeteria, I usually sat with a small group of girls, and whenever I'd make my way to their table, all the boys would taunt me, calling me a girl. In fact, the girls I hung around with could be just as brutal as the boys. Sometimes, out of nowhere, they would all gang up on me and tell me to go sit somewhere else. They'd sing along to the tune of "It's Raining Men," but use the words, "It's raining guts, hallelujah! It's raining Joey's guts, amen!" The lines between the chorus were all about how my different insides and body parts would splat and explode all over the ground.

It sounds like a truly bizarre way to tease someone, I know. But it cut like a knife (much like the one from

their song that freed my guts from my belly).

Although I was the girls' punching bag, sometimes they wouldn't want to deal with me at all and would just silently wave me away when I tried to sit with them. On one such humiliating day, I decided to lick my wounds by seeking out a frozen treat. The cafeteria had recently gotten an ice-cream vending machine, and it was considered a pretty big deal because most of the desserts you could order from the machine were pricey for the average elementary school student. After being rejected by the girls, I wanted to pretend that I was above them, so I haughtily marched up to the machine like I was the richest kid in school. I used the sixty cents I'd scrounged out of the bottom of my bag earlier that day to buy the cheapest item available—a cherry Popsicle. I turned to face the cafeteria as if I didn't have a care in the world, proudly unwrapped it, and took my first lick. My tongue immediately froze to it, just like that scene from *A Christmas Story* when the kid licks the flagpole.

I tried to remove my tongue discreetly at first while pretending to enjoy the Popsicle. I wiggled the bastard around in little circles, but it wouldn't budge and started to burn my tongue badly. I turned to face the wall and tugged on it hard, all the while keeping a side eye on the cafeteria to make sure no one saw what was happening. Too late. I heard someone start to laugh hysterically, and I slowly turned around to face the crowd, where everyone suddenly exploded with laughter and pointed at me. By the time a teacher finally came over to lead me away to the nurse's office so she could pour warm water over my tongue, I wanted to die.

The girls laughed the loudest at me that day, but while they could be terrible, I still tried to hang out with them because they seemed like a safer alternative than the boys. I was already becoming sensitive about people reacting to the way I behaved. I understood that I acted in a way that was considered feminine, but I didn't know how else to act. It was simply who I was. I'd been teased about it my whole life, especially by my cousins, who would call me Josephina every time they caught me trying on girls' dress-up clothes and playing with dolls when I'd visit their house. As much as I hated the nickname, I couldn't help it. I didn't want to play with those lame building blocks and plastic cars. Girl toys were much more fun.

My dad couldn't stand my disinterest in traditionally male activities, and would buy me things like basketballs or Wiffle Ball Bats for my birthday. He was always trying to forbid me from hanging out with girls and sometimes even sneered and said that I sounded gay when I talked. He pestered me to play sports my entire life, but they never interested me at all. I was terrified of getting hit in the face and breaking my nose.

But one day I watched a girls' soccer game after school with Taylor, and the players made it look like fun. It was just a lot of running around and kicking, which I felt that I could handle. I remember that I was riding in my dad's car when I told him that I wanted to join a soccer team, and I swear he almost drove off the road with excitement.

He signed me up for a team that wasn't officially affiliated with our school, so I was playing with a bunch of kids I didn't know. I was awful, but no one teased me about it to my face. The next season my dad ended up coaching, and even though I was still a terrible player, I felt safe because I knew no one would dare make fun of me with him there. Plus, my dad was really supportive and always cheered me on, even when I was making rookie mistakes like accidentally kicking the ball toward our own goal net instead of the opposing team's. Oopsie.

Our goalie wasn't exactly nice to me, but he wasn't mean either, which made him a buddy in my mind. He was a short, chubby blond kid named Alex and the only other kid on the team who went to the same school

as me. He was a band geek who played the trumpet—not one of the popular kids—so I never felt intimidated by him, even though we didn’t really talk much when we were at school. But he would usually at least say hi to me, which is more than I could say for most of the other kids.

One day during gym class, all the boys were separated from the girls for a game, and a bunch of the cool guys started to gang up on me. Michael, tall and broad shouldered, led the pack.

“You have no friends, you loser,” he said.

“I do too!” was my big, brave, and totally unconvincing response.

“Yeah?” he sneered. “Name one.”

Alex was in our class, and I pointed at him. “Alex is my friend!” Okay, maybe we weren’t close, but it seemed like a safe enough bet.

“No, I’m not!” he yelled, looking mortified that I’d called him out. All the boys went Oooooooh and pointed at me and laughed.

“Burn!” Michael said, cackling.

Alex and I never talked at practice after that, and my reputation as a friendless loser was officially cemented. I might as well have worn a name tag that said as much. But it was really hammered home one day in health class when we learned how to do CPR. Everyone was supposed to partner up with someone else to learn the technique. These forced divides were what I dreaded most in school because no one ever wanted to pair up with me. There were an odd number of kids in the class, and as usual I was left standing alone.

“Okay,” the teacher said. “One of you will have to be a group of three. Who wants Joey in their group?”

Not a single kid raised a hand. Some of them coughed and looked away; others snickered right in my face. I remember looking out at all of them and thinking, Not a single person here wants to learn how to save me if I was dying. LITERALLY DYING—not even the girls who sometimes let me sit with them at lunch (although that was probably to be expected since they already took such pleasure in imagining my death). The teacher must have quickly realized how humiliating the situation was for me, and she forced two kids to let me join them. They were not happy about it, let me tell you.

I knew that my perceived femininity was one reason that kids didn’t like me. Still, I mostly equated my unpopularity to the fact that I was in special ed. But in sixth grade, my SPED teacher, Ms. Diesel, started noticing that I was doing better than everyone else on my assignments. She began to spend extra time with me, helping me figure out math and reading comprehension problems. Toward the end of the year, she took me into the seventh-grade English teacher’s class and had me read out loud for her. She thought I did a great job, so I took a math placement test and aced that too. The school decided that I was proficient enough to join all of the regular classes, and I finally started to feel that I was normal.

How to Deal with Bullies

There have probably been millions of words written about the best way to deal with bullies, but I don’t think there is any one right answer. Every situation is different. Someone calling you a loser in the cafeteria is different from, say, getting the crap beaten out of you after school. I think that the thing to do is use your best

judgment. If you can throw a clever insult right back, then by all means do it—as long as you don't think it's going to cause more damage down the road. Most bullies are cowards and are acting out from their own insecurities. A good example is guys who call other kids a "fag." The most homophobic dudes at school are probably just freaked out because they had a hot dream about their best friend and have no clue that it's totally normal human behavior to experience a little bisexuality from time to time. If you feel that you are in physical danger, then be sure to tell a parent or teacher, but if not, then there's something to be said for learning how to stick up for yourself and letting lame name-calling roll off your back. In the end, it will just make you a stronger person and better prepared for the real world because, trust me, there are a lot of grown-up bullies out there too.

Be Friends with the SPED Kids!

And not just SPED kids, but anyone in your school who is physically or mentally different. By ignoring them, you're denying yourself a chance to make a new friend. You're also missing out on an opportunity to see the world through someone else's eyes, which is a cool thing to experience. Even something as simple as saying "hi" or giving someone a high five in the hallway can make a person feel special or important. Often you need to be the one to make the first move, because the person might be too shy or intimidated to reach out. Don't be scared. You won't regret it. And besides, what have you got to lose?

Users Review

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