

Stars Making a Social Impact: How Mark Ethan Toporek Aims to Improve the Immigration System



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As a part of our series about stars who are making an important social impact, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Mark Ethan Toporek.

Mark Ethan Toporek is an actor, teacher and producer. A member of the Actors Studio, he has appeared in films including “The Confession” (with Ben Kingsley and Alec Baldwin), “The Secret Lives of Dentists,” and “Lesser Prophets” (with John Turturro). His stage work includes playing Pope John-Paul II in Mario Fratti’s “The Vatican Knows” at Theatre for the New City, and three productions with the Yiddish Folksbiene Theatre. For 92Y, he has been creating and teaching dozens of film series that deal with such topics as the law, politics, media, immigration, and New York on film. A jury member of the Instant Composition Contest at the 2018 Transatlantyk Festival in Lodz (Poland), he also served on the Galway Film Festival Jury for Irish short films in 2013, & on the competition jury of the 2012 Forum on Law, Culture & Society film festival. He recently produced the video, “To Carry On: An Anthem of the American Immigrant Experience”: https://youtu.be/Da_gjrah9js

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Thank you so much for joining us! Can you share with us the “backstory” that led you to this career path?

I am first and foremost an actor. I have also been teaching many film series for Manhattan’s 92Y as well as the Queens Museum. I became a producer because of my passion for a song, “To Carry On: An Anthem of the American Immigrant Experience.” This took shape in November of 2016. On the first SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE after the presidential election, the brilliant Kate McKinnon continued to incarnate Hillary Clinton: after the death of Leonard Cohen, she did an atypically serious rendition of his “Hallelujah” before saying two poignant sentences to the audience (as Hillary): “I’m not giving up. And neither should you.”

I remembered the song “Carry On,” written by Celina Levy, which originated in a workshop back in 1995. It was created by the descendants (including me) of Holocaust survivors and resulted in the theater piece, “Children Of.” We presented it at the US Holocaust Memorial in Washington, as well as schools and museums for a few years. I never forgot the power of the original song that we sang at the conclusion of each performance: “Carry on” encapsulates the pain of loss as well as the regenerative power of the human spirit. It’s a song not only about legacy and remembrance, but the resilience that moves us beyond trauma into understanding.

The song came back to me as I witnessed the current administration attempting to remove the protection for “Dreamers” (the DACA recipients who had been brought to the U.S. as children). I changed a few lyrics to

create a revision of the song — now “To Carry On: An Anthem of the American Immigrant Experience” — that speaks directly to our charged political moment. This is a time when reservoirs of hope are needed, whether for refugees, “deportable” immigrants, or broken-hearted Americans. “To Carry On” is a song about inspiration and inclusivity. My hope is to widen the circle — to present the song in a way that stays true to its origins while encompassing individuals from other countries and cultures.

I see “To Carry On” as both a prayer and a protest song — a synthesis of *Born In The USA* and *We Are The World*: a person who aspires to become an American is already on the road to being ‘Reborn in the USA’. This song’s healing vision unites immigration with patriotism, a sustaining message to be heard above the daily news cycle. The aim of the video is to change the narrative disseminated by the current administration — not from the defensive to the offensive, but to the inclusive. It’s a song for all Americans.

Is there a person that made a profound impact on your life? Can you share a story?

Let me mention three remarkable women. Two of them are Holocaust survivors from Poland, namely my mother Regina Berman Toporek, and my mother-in-law, Dr. Cecile Insdorf. Each, in her own way, overcame unspeakable horrors to create a new and meaningful life in New York. They “carried on” with resilience and grace. The third is Malala, who continues to inspire me with her courage, perseverance and sweetness.

How are you using your success to bring goodness to the world? Can you share with us the meaningful or exciting causes you are working on right now?

My next public event will be as one of the guest speakers in “Racial Justice,” a new online 92Y film series moderated by my wife, Annette Insdorf. Since I have been teaching the work of Sidney Poitier for many years, I encouraged her to present a terrific but unknown movie, “Mandela and DeKlerk.” She will therefore be including me (along with actor Franz Jones) as the guests for her August 30th class.

Are there three things that individuals, society or the government can do to support you in this effort?

1. Share the video.
2. Do whatever you can to protect DACA recipients, especially given that — of the approximately 700,000 “Dreamers in the U.S. — 200,000 have been frontline workers during the pandemic.
3. Try to see each refugee as a human being who is not merely in need of our assistance, but a potential contributor to the United States.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you explain how that was relevant in your life?

There’s an old Yiddish adage, “Der Mentsch Tracht un Gott Lacht”: Man Plans and God Laughs. I guess we have to be prepared for futility ... but try anyway. That brings me to another *Life Lesson*, Mother Teresa’s “Anyway” poem. It contains the resonant line, “The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; Do good anyway.”

We are blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Politics, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them :-)

Barbra Streisand, as I believe she would be the ideal voice to bring another version of “To Carry On” into the world.

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A *bout The Interviewer: Karina Michel Feld is the Owner and Executive Producer of Tallulah Films. Karina has 20+ years of experience in TV, film, and print and is a respected member of The Producers Guild of America. The mission of Tallulah Films is to bring together directors, entrepreneurs, film investors, and screenwriters to produce award-winning TV and film projects. Tallulah Films continues to be drawn towards films that are meaningful, influential, and uplifting. Karina is also Co-Owner and CFO of Fresh Patch LLC (as seen on ABC’s “Shark Tank”).*

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