



ONE TO WATCH

Meredith Grace Dabney

by Melissa Fales

photo by Sheldon Botler

Sixteen-year-old actor, writer, and now filmmaker Meredith Grace Dabney recently released her first short film, *Here Today*. Dabney may be young, but as *Here Today* demonstrates, she's got passion, talent, and a lot to say about personal connections and how the things people say and do every day make a difference. She sees her youth as a boon when it comes to filmmaking. "Everyone says that age is just a number," says Dabney. "I believe that. I think hearing from people of different ages is a better way to share our many different perspectives when it comes to film or life in general."

Dabney wrote the screenplay for *Here Today* when she was 14 years old. She calls the story about a teenage girl who moves to a new high school and wants to fit in with a new group of friends "universally autobiographical." Dabney also acts in the film, playing Katie, the new girl. "At the beginning, you can tell Katie's at a low point," says Dabney. "She's wearing darker clothes and she seems disconnected. "Then Abby comes over and introduces herself and everything changes. Katie is able to connect and find her place within that group." Then, everything changes again.

Aspects of *Here Today* were inspired by Dabney's own life. She's always been someone people confide in. "People tend to share things with me they don't feel comfortable sharing with others," Dabney says. "They feel they can trust me. When people open up to me about the things they're really struggling with, they're in a really vulnerable place." She's had peers reveal to her that they feel alone, depressed, even suicidal. "So many of us struggle with mental health issues," says Dabney. "If we can talk about it together, we can grow. We are not alone. We are stronger as a whole." The storyline of



Here Today echoes that concept. “The message is that the choices we make, the words we speak, and the actions we take all have an impact beyond what we ever realize,” says Dabney. “I think it speaks to experiences that many, if not most of us face but don’t always have the tools to communicate about it.”

Dabney, who is homeschooled, got her start in acting as a child when some of her friends were taking an acting class. “I thought it looked cool and I wanted to try it,” she says. “I really liked the whole idea of storytelling through art.” She started out with stage performance and moved on to musical theater. “I was a triple threat—acting, singing, and dancing,” she says. When she had the opportunity to act in a film, Dabney realized she had found her niche. “It was amazing,” she says. “It was a dinner party scene and I was cast as an adopted child

trying to find my lost family members.” The experience left her wanting more.

When Dabney talked to her acting coach about how much she enjoyed making the film, he suggested she try writing a part for herself. Conveniently, Dabney had a first draft of *Here Today* at the ready. “I had already written it as a way to get the thoughts out of my mind,” she says. “Writing is how I express myself and process my feelings.” After reading *Here Today*, her acting coach thought it was quite good and offered to share it with some of his friends in the film industry. Director Erica Arvold signed on right away. “It was amazing how it all came together,” says Dabney.

Acting in a film she also wrote was intense for Dabney. “I felt like I was in two worlds,” she says. “It was my script and my project and I knew the meaning behind it, but I was also an actor trying to portray a character in this world as truthfully as I could. I focused on exiting out of the real world and just being in that moment.”

Accompanying the release of *Here Now* is Dabney’s “You Okay?” social media challenge, which invites people to

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check in with their friends and family. “The idea is to encourage people to reach out and connect with their loved ones,” says Dabney. “We want to keep that door of communication open, so when someone needs to talk, they know someone cares.”

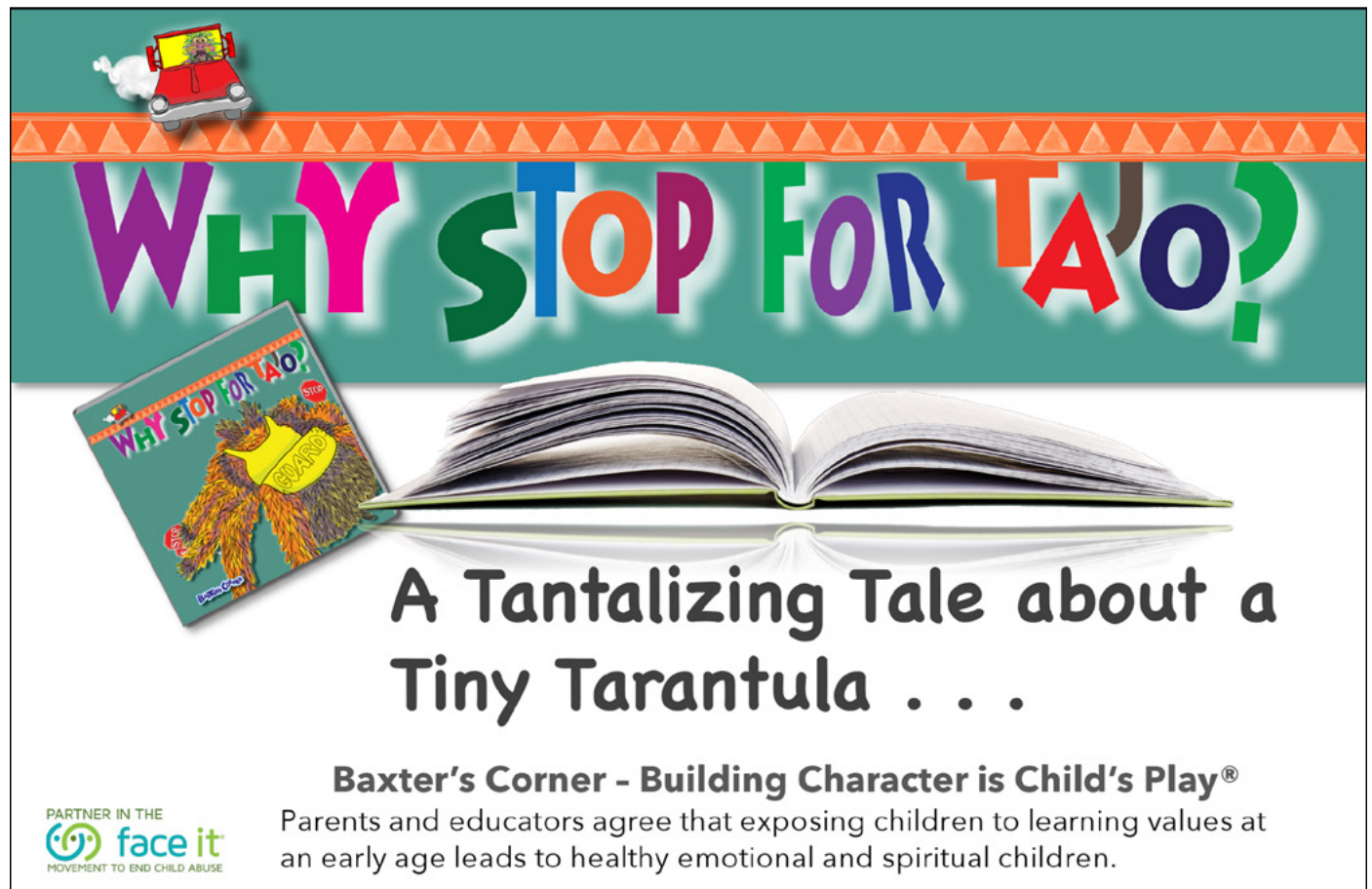
Dabney is currently creating a production team for her next project; a trilogy of films she’s written. “The first one is *Blink!*,” she says. “It’s in pre-production right now. It’s a film about family dynamics and how we don’t

always communicate to the best of our ability because we're caught up in our own world. Sometimes we don't open our eyes, even to our own families, long enough to see there's something missing in that unit." She's hoping *Blink!* will be released in the fall of 2021.

Here Now is the first release from Astrabeta Creations, Dabney's production company. Dabney is also forming a non-profit organization. "It's going to be a collective humanity platform that uses the arts to give people a voice," she says. "I want to create one unified team of voices from different walks of life and create stories that express different points of view through art, through

film, of course, but also in painting and photography and other mediums." Dabney says she hopes her non-profit will not only amplify these voices, but encourage others to listen to them. "The motto of my production company is 'Telling stories that need to be told,'" she says. "I will apply that motto to my non-profit organization, too. It's a great time for people to open their eyes and ears and hearts to all of the stories around us."

For more information about Meredith Grace Dabney, to watch *Here Now*, and to learn more about the "You Okay?" campaign, visit meredithgracedabney.com. ●



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