

Without End

By Peter Simon

Hours after giving a deeply moving eulogy for his grandmother, Esther Bates, in Buffalo last year, Michael Bihovsky was urged by a family friend to write a play about his unusually close and candid relationship with his grandparents.

"Instantly I knew that was exactly what I needed to do and what I wanted to do," said Bihovsky, who is 27. He stayed up until 3 a.m. the next morning listing memories of his grandmother, Esther Bates, a long-time Buffalo elementary school and Head Start teacher, and his grandfather, Martin Bates, a mathematician who died in 2009.

The Bates family lived most of their lives in Kenmore while Bihovsky grew up in Philadelphia. Still, a strong bond developed through frequent visits and telephone conversations. As Bihovsky began to write, the memories flowed.

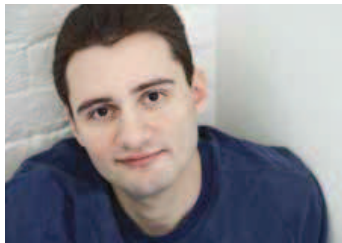
"Nearly every minute of every day was spent working on it," Bihovsky, a New York City playwright and actor, said in a recent phone interview. "It was on my mind constantly."

The result was *Without End*, an 80 minute play based on Bihovsky's interaction with his grandparents from age 5 to 26. The play will premiere at the Jewish Community Center's Benderson Family Building at 7 p.m. on December 15th, and is sponsored by Congregation Shir Shalom. Tickets are \$12 for the general public and \$6 for students. In addition to Bihovsky, the cast for the staged reading includes local actors Michael Frisch, Darleen Pickering Hummert and Noah Kotzin.

Also, Bihovsky will discuss the play and his grandparents at Congregation Shir Shalom, 4660 Sheridan Drive, Williamsville during Shabbat services at 7:30 p.m. on December 12th.

Bihovsky, who earned degrees from New York University in musical theater, astrophysics and mythology, is best known for "One Grain More" a humorous and irreverent You Tube parody, which won a national "Best of Faux" award. He has also written the music and lyrics of three plays and has had acting roles in other productions.

But *Without End*, which Bihovsky describes as about 95 percent



Michael Bihovsky

autobiographical, is far more personal. "It's about people truly and deeply connected to each other, and always finding ways to reconnect — even after death," he said. "It was the most cathartic experience of my life."

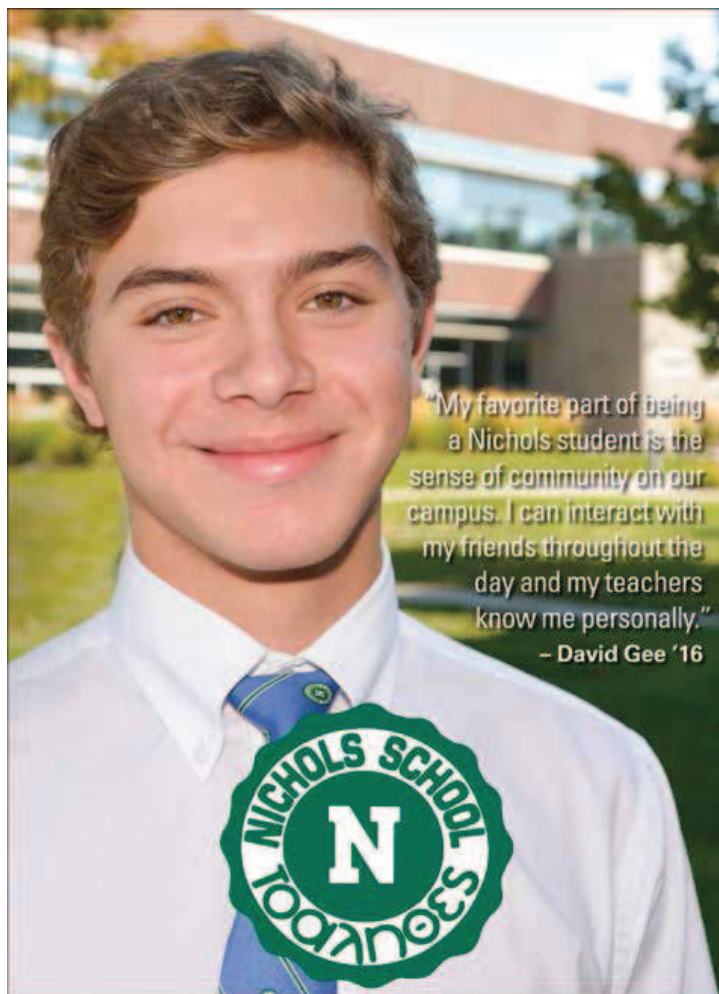
Getting it right was also quite a journey. The first version was largely a tribute to Esther Bates, a past president of the former Temple Sinai, and Marty Bates, who worked at Bell Aircraft and Sierra Research and helped develop an early version of GPS aviation technology. Discussions with other writers convinced Bihovsky that the play needed to reach deeper below the surface with more specifics, more tension and more candor.

Bihovsky accomplished that largely through anecdotes. At age 10, he asked his grandfather — ever the mathematician — to clarify an element of Russian grammar. Instead, Bates spent the next three hours giving his grandson an understanding of calculus. Much of the play deals with how Bihovsky and his grandparents managed to fuse three different approaches to life and spirituality. In that context, Bihovsky, a Conservative Jew, expresses the disappointment he felt when Bates recited a Reconstructionist version of the aliyah at his Bar Mitzvah.

But overriding any family tensions were feelings of love, commitment and respect. When Michael was eight, Esther Bates tape-recorded conversations he made up between wooden figurines crafted by Marty Bates. "That was my first experience writing plays," Bihovsky said. "My grandmother was one of my absolutely best friends."

Buffalo is the perfect place for *Without End* to premiere, Bihovsky said, since "the Jewish community in Buffalo meant the world to both my grandparents." Like so much else, that feeling — even largely from afar — was passed on to him. "The community there has been a constant I've known as long as I can remember," Bihovsky said.

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