



“I was bullied for having **DEAF** **PARENTS**”

When *Empire* star **Grace Byers** was a child, she was tormented for being different. Now she’s sharing her inspiring story of finding self-love in a new children’s book

by **ALEXIS RELIFORD**



FAMILY PORTRAIT

Grace, *above*, and as a child with her older sister, Faith, and her mom and dad.

“HEY, WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOUR MOM?” The question hit then 8-year-old Grace Byers like a slap. She had never thought her family had anything “wrong” with it—but that day at school, she was suddenly aware that to much of the outside world, it did. Both her parents were deaf, her father since birth and her mother since age 2, from complications of pneumonia. “My sister and I learned American Sign Language before we could speak,” says Grace, now 33, who stars on the Fox hit series *Empire*. “To us, it was normal. But a lot of the kids didn’t know how to process it and took to bullying.”

From that point on, school became a stress zone for Grace. “Most days I was ostracized,” she says, with kids sometimes

hurling slurs that she was “weird.” Once, Grace was kicked in the face; another time, she was choked. “As a child, if you don’t know how to get out of that situation, you begin to think it’s normal to be treated like that, which is terrifying,” she says.

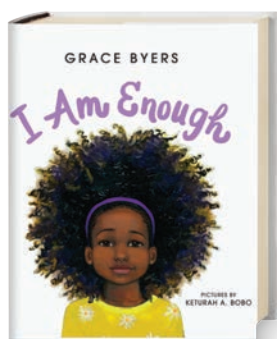
Grace’s peers also pounced on her family structure. Her parents had split when she was a toddler, and “I was bullied simply for coming from a different household,” says Grace, who was raised in the Cayman Islands.

The bullying caused Grace’s attitude toward her mom to shift: “I was embarrassed by the fact that my mom was so much louder than everyone else because she can’t hear herself. I would say, ‘Mom, can you lower your voice?’ and ‘Mom, →

can you not sign so largely?" What I love about my mother is that she's so accepting of who she is, and she said no," Grace recalls. "She said, 'This is who I am, and they're going to accept it, and it's going to be OK.' I never understood that as a child, but now I'm grateful my mom adopted that mentality, because I eventually learned that even if other people think differently, I'm just fine the way I am."

With friendships scarce, Grace found comfort in her sister. "We're very close. Sometimes we were all we had," she says. She also channeled her sense of isolation into performing, taking up singing and dancing at an early age. After graduating from high school and college, she earned an MFA in acting at the University of California, Irvine.

But in college, the feeling of being different continued to hound Grace. "My mother is Afro-Caribbean and my father is white, and people would ask me, 'What are you? Are you white, or are you black?'" she says. "It was the first time I felt like I had to identify myself, like I had to check a box. And because I was multi, I didn't know how to think about that." The pressure stirred up old feelings from childhood. "I was always faced with not being 'enough' to fit in and be accepted," says Grace.



THROWING A BOOK AT BULLIES

"Like the sun, I'm here to shine," reads the first line in Grace's beautifully illustrated confidence-building storybook.

After grad school, Grace moved between New York City and Chicago, performing in theater productions and commercials—until a brush with death in NYC pushed her to adjust her mindset. "I was walking to the subway station and was hit by a car," she says. "It completely changed my life." Part of her face was split open to the skull, and she was bed-ridden for two weeks. "The crash forced me to think about what my purpose in life was," says Grace. "I began to understand that I am worthy and *enough* simply because I am alive."

Not long after that, Grace caught her big break when she snagged the coveted role of Anika Calhoun on *Empire*, where she met the man who's now her husband, costar Trai Byers. "It's easy to dislike my character, because she's the other woman and does terrible things," says Grace. "I can't connect to what she does, but can connect to how she feels. Have I felt like an outsider? Yes. Been ostracized? Yes." Ironically, playing Anika triggered cyberbullying

"There are so many emotional experiences that connect us, and when we share our stories, we begin to feel normalized."

against Grace. "Believe it or not, some people cannot separate my character from me," she says. "Even as an adult, you're not exempt from negativity that will try to tear you down."

To help girls cope with bullying, Grace works with Saving Our Daughters (savingourdaughters.org), an anti-bullying nonprofit that offers mentoring. "At one point, someone asked me the one thing I'd want to tell my 8-year-old self, and I said I'd want her to know that she is enough," says Grace. "Those are the words I wish I had heard."

From that conversation came Grace's first children's book, *I Am Enough*, out this month. "I want this to be a book of hope for children and adults alike," says Grace. "There are so many emotional experiences that connect us, and when we share our stories, we begin to feel normalized. My goal is to help people understand that we've already been born with everything we need to be valued in this world." ♦



WEDDING BELLES

Grace beaming with her mom and sister on her wedding day.



WIPE AWAY MILDEW.

If you see a spot of mildew along the bathtub edge, saturate a cotton ball with bleach and place it against the stain. Continue to wet it as it dries out. This will keep the mildew from taking hold until you can give the tub a proper scrub.