

Marlee Roberts

Screenwriting elective paves the way to NYU Tisch School of the Arts and career as film director

Director and producer Marlee Roberts credits The Virtual High School (VHS) courses with readying her for college and her current life in ways that extended beyond academic preparation. "Online learning prepares students to take initiative, find self-motivation, and handle new media and technology, which will be inevitably necessary as they move out of high school into college and the workforce," she said.

Roberts found her calling early in life; as a child living close to New York City, she had the opportunity to begin a career in the entertainment industry. From ages 4 to 14, she worked as a child actress, making appearances on David Letterman's *The Late Show* and ABC's *One Life to Live*, being cast in the musical *The American Girls Revue*, and sharing the stage with stars like Hall & Oates, Ashley Tisdale, and others.

In high school, Roberts wanted to study the behind-the-scenes aspects of film in order to further her career, but her school, North Arlington High School in New Jersey, didn't have a strong student population interested in film and therefore, didn't offer any film classes or programs. However, they did offer online courses through VHS.

During her junior year of high school, Roberts enrolled in VHS courses for music history, entrepreneurship,



and the Fundamentals of Screenwriting. She credits the screenwriting course with helping prepare her for the prestigious NYU Tisch School of the Arts. "Learning screenwriting structure was invaluable and also allowed me to have writing samples to submit for my college portfolio," she said. "Most freshman entering Tisch School of the Arts' filmmaking program took film courses in high school (production, development, etc.) or were involved in clubs or extracurricular programs at their high schools. VHS gave me the opportunity in high school to take a course in this field and get an understanding of what it would be like."

VHS also helped Roberts by enabling her to fulfill prerequisites for her college of choice. "It was recommended that I take four years of a foreign language to get into the school, so it was incredibly important that I could have the flexibility to make the best schedule possible," she said. In her senior year, Roberts took VHS' AP Spanish course. "VHS allowed me to take AP Spanish during a period that fit in my schedule so that I could also partake in AP US History at my school. There would have been a conflict if I had wished to take Spanish 4 Honors," she explained. "Not only did VHS allow me to do that, it even offered me a more challenging class ... and it prepared me for the rigor of an AP exam. I scored well enough on the AP Spanish test that I was able to get college credit!"



Roberts on the set of Little Miss Perfect

Roberts recalls her overall VHS experiences as very positive. She said, "The independence of online learning lends itself well to students who like to work at their own pace, which I found incredibly helpful. Online learning allowed me the flexibility to work on the material within the schedule of my choosing. I could work on an assignment for the allotted period time or take it home and do it then. If I could finish the assignment early, I could work on the next one, or study for a test, or whatever else was needed. I was never held back if I completed things sooner than the usual 45-minute class period. And it was never held against me if I needed additional time after the class."

For those worried that online courses may be too socially isolating, Roberts has an anecdote that demonstrates the social learning nature of VHS classes. "I actually met one of my classmates from Screenwriting Fundamentals in person at a class at NYU years later! He is still a friend of mine to this day," she said.

Roberts has successfully transitioned into filmmaking, producing more than 20 projects since 2010. In late 2015, she finished her feature directorial debut, a film called *Little Miss Perfect* about an overambitious high school freshman who secretly starves herself. "This project is my baby," said Roberts. "It was my first chance to direct a feature film and it was the hardest thing I've ever done. It's been exhausting and yet, the most fulfilling project I've done to date."

Roberts recently signed on to direct her sophomore feature film, a comedy titled *Paying Natasha*, which is written and executive produced by Broadway producer Sharleen Cooper Cohen (*An American in Paris*). In addition to her new directing project, Roberts is also co-writing and co-developing a psychological thriller with renowned producer James Simpson who has been mentoring her. "I got quite lucky meeting him in college while he was visiting to do research for one of his upcoming films," she said. Also, on Roberts' horizon as producer is a feature psychological drama, a sci-fi utopian film, and some smaller projects.

Roberts offers the following advice to students taking VHS online courses:

- Talk to your teacher often, especially if the class is challenging. They always support and help.
- Take a chance and push yourself with a high-level or challenging course if you can and you have the time to put in the effort.
- And most importantly, DON'T procrastinate!

For more information about Marlee, visit:

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The Virtual High School (VHS, Inc.), a non-profit leader in blended and online learning, offers a variety of programs and curriculum to meet the needs of schools, students, and families. To learn more visit www.VHSLearning.org.