

LAUREN TOYOTA

Is Hot for Life!

Written by Carole Audet | Photography by Joel Barhamand

Lauren Toyota is a master at realizing the dreams she has for her life. She's done this by letting go of fear and getting out of her own way.

As a teenager, Lauren Toyota dreamed of becoming a VJ on MuchMusic. She was determined to achieve this dream, so she kept it to herself because she didn't want to risk anyone trying to dissuade her from pursuing it. Despite being shy, she thought the people she saw on TV doing this work were given a platform to be themselves, regardless of how unconventional they may be. She had always felt like an outsider, so, in a sense, she believed she was like them.

Upon graduating from a two-year music industry business program at Durham College in Oshawa, Ontario, Lauren auditioned for a job in TV and came close to getting it. This was her sign that she was on the right track—that she had what they were looking for. She was confident that an opportunity would come her way, and indeed it did. She successfully auditioned for a show called 969 on Razer in Vancouver, so she packed her bags and moved across the country for what was the original MTV in Canada.

"There was no question this was my foot in the door as someone who had no experience." While the job was only one day per week to start, Lauren was undaunted and got a serving job until she was made full-time.

"It was a one-hour lifestyle show targeted at teenagers, and it was similar to MuchMusic. We did what's called throws on camera, so we would throw to a segment, throw to a music video. I got my feet wet. It was like going to school for broadcasting because it was an open and free learning environment with all young people."

This independent production was eventually bought by CHUM Media, who also owns MuchMusic, which meant that Lauren automatically became part of the MuchMusic family and became their West Coast correspondent.

She produced and hosted the West Coast version of a show called *Going Coastal* with her East Coast counterpart in Halifax.

An Attitude Shift

Like many people during the 2008 recession, Lauren was laid off. This loss meant she moved back home with her parents in Toronto. Lauren considers this a low point in her life, but an important lesson as well.

"I was determined to not let it ruin me and not let it kill my dreams of working in television. I didn't take it well, as you can imagine; you feel embarrassed, and you feel cheated and you're angry."

While she kept her hand in broadcasting by taking on

freelance work for online media outlets, such as doing interviews on the red carpet for events like the Juno Awards and the Toronto International Film Festival, Lauren admits she spent time wallowing, resentful of having to also take on serving work. "I think I was operating under a lot of ego. I was just getting my feet wet, doing what I wanted as a dream job, and was starting to get known and then to get knocked down a few pegs. I had a chip on my shoulder—I had an attitude about it." But she soon realized that this attitude was not serving her, particularly when she got fired from a serving job. That was the push she needed to move forward.

With a remarkable level of self-awareness for someone so young, Lauren gave herself a serious talking to, reminding herself this attitude was not helping her. "That was the lesson: Don't be a jerk, and you're not too good for anything. You have to do whatever you need to do to survive, and do it with passion, no matter what it is."

This newfound frame of mind led Lauren to write to her colleagues from her first TV gig to thank them for giving her the opportunity and for teaching her how to do everything that's involved with producing a TV show. This inspired a feeling of gratitude which helped her release the negativity around being laid off.

"It was from doing that that a door opened, and I ended up getting hired at MuchMusic in 2010. A lot of people I used to work with went to work in the Toronto building after leaving Vancouver. I had contacts there and I was always keeping in touch



Lauren interviewing singer Enrique Iglesias during her time working as a host for MUCH in 2015. Credit: Lauren Toyota YouTube channel

with them. Finally, one day they called me, and I ended up taking a producing role there.

Her job involved training new junior hosts, basically people like her a few years prior. But timing was on her side when a new show was set to air with the junior hosts still not ready. This opened the door for Lauren to step into her ultimate dream job—MuchMusic VJ.

"This was my dream job because I was doing live television. I was doing the big interviews with all these artists. It was the era of One Direction, *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, so I did interviews with those cast members. I hosted the MuchMusic VJ search to bring in a new VJ, the MuchMusic Video Awards live on the street at Queen and John. This is what I had always envisioned doing."

Moving On

In 2014, she faced another layoff under the new MuchMusic owners. But, she had learned her lesson and she was established in her career. She had accomplished what she set out to do during her time in this job, so she wasn't bothered by this layoff.

Lauren had become vegan in 2010, and she started a food blog shortly before she got her dream job. Going vegan was part of what she calls her "attitude adjustment. I adjusted my lifestyle to going vegan. I felt like I was clearing house. There was a big shift personally, professionally, and spiritually."

She began to explore her creativity—something that was not entirely encouraged in her day job—and come up with vegan recipes, then she would share them online. "I was putting a lot of energy into posting my vegan recipes on my *hot for food* Instagram that I started in 2012. I built a community there and started feeling invigorated by that."

Her layoff in 2014 provided the opportunity to explore the potential of her *hot for food* blog—redesigned and relaunched about six months before being laid off—what it could be, and how she could grow it as a business. Instead of looking for another job, Lauren decided to work on *hot for food* full time, not knowing exactly what to do or how everything would unfold.

By 2014, media was starting to look quite different, which is partly why Lauren was laid off because YouTube was becoming a popular way to share content, making channels like MuchMusic obsolete. "Thankfully, I had jumped on to that bandwagon by starting a blog and a separate Instagram account that featured food. Foodie content was starting to become popular at that time, and the vegan scene was still small online. I felt I was part of what was happening there, especially because I was making comfort food and I was doing the opposite of what everyone thought vegan was at that time, which was more like raw food, super healthy, green-smoothie style."

Lauren is known partly for veganizing comfort food recipes, which were popular with those who followed her. She was intent on proving that you can eat better versions of your favourite dishes as a vegan. Her process worked; not only did she grow her following, but she also attracted media attention and got gigs creating recipes for Food Network Canada's blog, among other online platforms, which provided a bit of income. Her background in television came in handy too, and she was able to book cooking segments on morning programs. Everything she was doing was helping to build her brand.

"That helped show the world I'm still here—I'm not this VJ from MuchMusic who didn't do anything else. I had a pretty clear vision of what I wanted to present. I wanted to take my experience in television and fold it into this new career. And it worked. It's essentially been this crazy ride ever since."

Lauren now has hundreds of thousands of followers on her YouTube channel, but this was one medium she was reluctant to try because what she was seeing was

silly content, like pranking. But, lucky for us, she got over it quickly, and lucky for her, she was reaching people she wasn't able to reach via television.

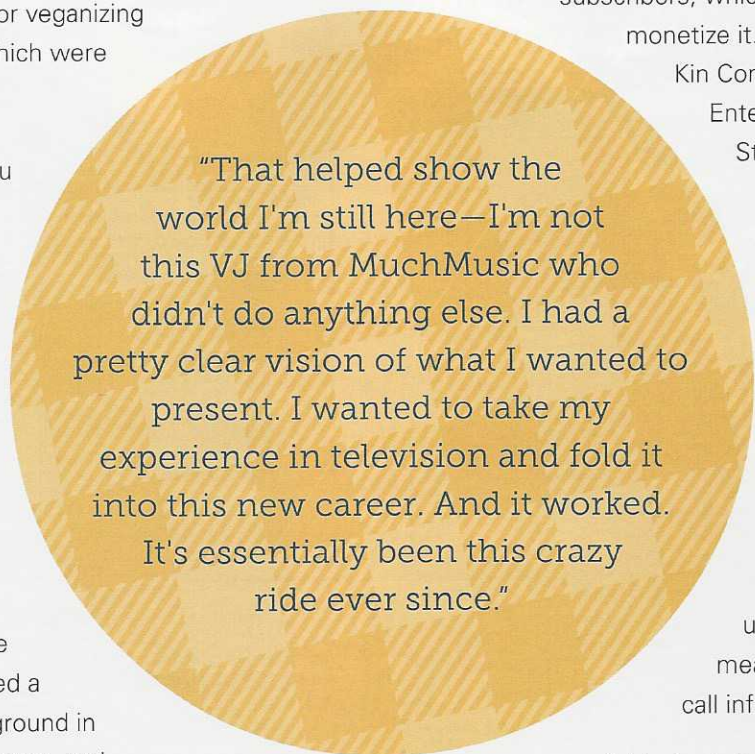
"I started to realize I do want to make video content, I want to make really good cooking videos and food content, and this is the place to do it. I think it was great timing because I was an early adopter. Of course, there was food content, but I hadn't seen anything that was well produced or made the food look good. With my production background, I could make pretty slick stuff."


The professionalism of her channel attracted subscribers, which meant she could monetize it. Then she was signed with Kin Community, Corus Entertainment's Creator Media Studio for YouTube monetization, which includes brand partnerships. "I got in with them from the ground up, which helped because they brought brand opportunities to the table, especially when Canadian companies were just starting to understand what this meant—what you now would call influencer content."

With the help of Kin Community, Lauren got a couple of big brand deals that assisted her efforts to grow her YouTube channel. "They helped me take it to the next level big time and helped me make proper money where now I was running a business."

The first brand deal she got was with McCain Foods. She did a frozen fries campaign for them that to her spoke to how veganism doesn't have to mean eating strange foods. As mentioned, Lauren is all about comfort food, and McCain Super Fries was a perfect fit for her growing brand.

"It was a mainstream campaign we were involved in





"At the time I thought, I don't want to make a cookbook; that seems weird. I'm this Internet person who's modern and doing media this way. A book seems kind of antiquated. But I didn't know anything about the industry . . ."

with other foodie creators who weren't vegan; we were the only vegans. It was good positioning to see this new vegan brand involved with a big brand like McCain."

Wanting to support new vegan brands that don't have a budget for advertising or influencer marketing, Lauren would often showcase their products on her channels. But most of the paid and commissioned work came from established brands, often owned by large parent companies.

The popularity of her channel led to a publishing deal for her first cookbook, *Vegan Comfort Classics: 101 Recipes to Feed Your Face.*, about two years later. "At the time I thought, I don't want to make a cookbook; that seems weird. I'm this Internet person who's modern and doing media this way. A book seems kind of antiquated. But I didn't know anything about the industry. Cookbook sales are still fairly consistent and popular even now."

Lauren got an agent and struck a deal with Penguin Random House.

Move to L.A.

Another of Lauren's dreams that she manifested for herself was a move to Los Angeles. While she started to explore the possibility around 10 years ago, it wasn't yet the right time. But while planning her second cookbook, *Hot for Food All Day*, in the summer of 2018, the time felt right. Her career was solid, she could work from anywhere, and she had attained all the requirements for a visa—such as being published and having acquired a lot of press—so she hired a lawyer and completed her application. About 10 months later, during the summer of 2019, her application was approved, and she made the move.

"The plan was to finish and shoot the cookbook in L.A. I wanted a different energy, a different environment. I had gone through a breakup a year and a half prior with the person that I was doing *hot for food* with and who was part of the first cookbook. I wanted everything to be brand new. Moving to L.A. was a good place to get a new start."

Three weeks after Lauren submitted her second

cookbook, COVID shut down the world. Despite this making it a bit challenging to be a newcomer to L.A., she had many friends there—Canadian colleagues from the past.

When people asked why she moved to L.A., Lauren didn't have a conclusive answer—maybe to grow her business, or maybe it was the weather. The real reason was made clear when she met her partner, Michael.

"It turns out I came here to start a family, which I didn't plan, didn't expect, didn't even want my whole life. From the time I was young until about one month before I conceived a baby, I was like, no, not having kids."

But like many women, Lauren, who will be 40 in November, started to hear her biological clock. "As I was approaching 39, I felt I had to make a clear decision. Even though I've always had this curiosity to have a child, it was the fear that was blocking it, like am I going to be a good parent? There were a lot of reasons going through my head why I shouldn't do it. I was starting to feel this pressure that was fully self-inflicted of making a choice. Either choose to be child-free and be content with that decision or choose to have a child and be content with that decision."

True to her adventurous spirit, she had a moment of clarity when she told herself to stop being afraid. "From that point on, it felt like I had let go of a lot of that fear. It was released. I was with the right person. I was in a committed relationship, and he did want kids. I went with it, and it felt right. I never questioned it. I never thought I would ever feel that way about this particular choice."

Lauren and Michael conceived about one month after they made the decision. They welcomed their son in April this year. Like everything else in her life, once she sets her mind to something, it seems nothing can stop her. "I get out of my own way and then the path opens up."

She's surprised herself with how easily she's adapted to being a mom. She loves her new role and caring for her son. "He's so fun. He's cute and adorable. I never thought I would say these things. I thought motherhood would feel extremely overwhelming. But I feel like I'm



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thriving. I have renewed energy. And I felt this way soon after I had a C-section."

Doctors warned her that it would take about six weeks to recover from her C-section. She admits that the first week was challenging and she experienced a lot of pain, but by the second week the worst of it was behind her and she was fully enjoying motherhood. She credits her plant-based diet for her quick recovery. "Mike and I feel proud that this baby is perfectly healthy. He was big, 9 pounds, 5 ounces, and I'm a tiny little vegan girl. But I'm able to grow this healthy, big

baby. I don't have any scientific data, but I think being vegan does have benefits."

This family's vegan lifestyle will extend to how they raise their son. When people ask her about the possibility of her son wanting to eat a hot dog at some future birthday party, Lauren is quick to respond that he will have been raised knowing that meat is made from animals that are his friends. "I plan on taking him to farm sanctuaries pretty soon. We have a dog and he'll understand that the dog is the same as these other animals. Once you're raised with certain beliefs, ethics, and understanding, you wouldn't choose to eat a hot dog when you're at your friend's house. I'm going to give it a go. Of course, there are always going to be things we encounter as he gets older that I can't predict. But kids can thrive on a vegan diet for sure." When he's ready to eat solids, Lauren will be in the kitchen making his pureed meals, something she's thankful her mom did for her because this instilled in her healthy eating habits.

Looking to the Future

In 2019, Lauren started helping a friend, Amanda Persi of The Getaway Co., host vegan travel adventures to such locales as Bali and Italy. This October, she will once again be travelling to Bali to host a 10-day Live With Purpose adventure, this time with Michael and baby in tow.

Lauren and Amanda have been friends since they were teenagers. Both passionate vegans, she was thrilled to help Amanda with her new venture, which they hashed out over lunch in Toronto. About seven months after that lunchtime conversation, Lauren found herself in Bali hosting many people who follow her on Instagram and YouTube.

"The participants don't have to think about anything, it's all taken care of. You're meeting other people and everyone gets along because we're like-minded—we're trying to live cruelty-free lifestyles. The relationships that form on these trips blow my mind."

Lauren loves to collaborate with other vegans, and she will happily help them with their projects, which is also a way to advance the vegan movement. Richard Makin of School Night Vegan, who connected with Lauren at her

book signing in Atlanta and who has since become a good friend, collaborated with Lauren and Amanda on a Getaway Co. trip to Italy during the summer of 2021. He will be joining Amanda again in September in Switzerland. Timothy Pakron, of Mississippi Vegan, reached out to Lauren over Instagram, and she has referred him to Amanda who enlisted him to help host two getaways in Italy this past June.



Lauren says of her relationships with these fellow vegans, "We talk all the time as friends and colleagues and people who want to help each other out. We're creative, so we're always coming up with new ideas and things we want to do. We will keep working on trips and we have some other plans in the works that it's too early to talk about, but we're never short of business ideas."

We're excited to see what Lauren does next! In the meantime, you can follow her EAT IT by hot for food membership platform where members get exclusive recipes and behind-the-scenes content. •

Get hot for life with Lauren!

Want to see more about Lauren's online lifestyle community and cookbooks?

hotforfoodblog.com

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