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CARY EDMONDSON/NEWS STAFF PHOTO

Ellie Smith performs the national anthem before the start of the UNLV-Reno football game. Smith already has a number of high-profile performances under her belt.

Small singer, big voice

Young Henderson performer already impressing crowds with vocal ability

By STACEY BONNAR

Ellie Smith is a 10-year-old girl with a voice powerful enough to silence the most rambunctious crowd. At the recent UNLV football game against their rivals from Reno, the fifth grader from St. Victor's Elementary School took command of the crowd of more than 37,000 at Sam Boyd Stadium. "Oh, say can you see," she sang, and most fans stood, hands over their hearts. But in the Rebel

alumni section, the whooping and hollering continued. "... by the dawn's early light ..." and the crowd quieted a bit more. Then came "... what so proudly we hail..." On the high note, those in the Rebel crowd stood, speechless, looking toward the field to find the little girl with the big voice projected on the stadium screens. Ellie performed with Sally Struthers in the UNLV production of "Annie" a couple of years ago

and has sung the national anthem at such high-profile events as the Oak Tree at Santa Anita Race Track and at a game at Dodger Stadium over the summer. She recently recorded her first soundtrack, "A Quest for Jell-O," in Los Angeles. Despite her talent, Ellie is a kid first, her parents, Rick and Geri Smith, say. They have worked hard to keep performing in its proper perspective to ensure and Ellie and her younger sister Amy, the dancer in the family, get to enjoy their childhoods as long as

possible. Already Ellie seems to not let performing interfere with her sense of fun. Although polite and pleasant to a reporter, she was more interested in whether she would have a chance to swat a beach ball bouncing around the stadium bleachers than answering interview questions. When asked if she was nervous just before the performance, she

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Youngster has recorded soundtrack

looked up quizzically and asked, "about what?"

"That's the thing with her," Geri Smith said. "She doesn't get nervous, and we're standing on the sidelines ready to throw up. It's very nerve-racking for us."

Ellie said, "I don't get nervous. But I am double jointed in my thumb."

"See that's the 10-year-old in her," her mom said, grinning.

Jamie Mapes, the Thomas & Mack sports marketing manager who hired Ellie for the UNLV gig, said he has to worry less about her than some of his adult performers.

"She has a presence, she's calm and is a rock even in front of a big crowd," he said. "What I like is that she genuinely likes singing."

Mapes said he heard about her from former UNLV football coach and radio commentator Harvey Hyde.

"I didn't have a demo CD or anything at first, but when I heard it, I thought she was 15 or 16," Mapes said. "Then when I saw this little girl sing, I was pretty much blown away. She's got a set of pipes on her."

Ellie has been reliable for him as well, he said. "I like the fact that I can call her in a pinch to do a softball game or a smaller event and she'll do it, which is rare when someone is getting more well known."

Geri Smith said Ellie is getting more offers to sing, but they are resisting regular trips to Los Angeles for work.

"We don't go to L.A. unless we have a specific performance," she said. "We're trying to keep her life as normal as we can."

That limits her daughter's opportunities, she said.

"Unfortunately even though Las Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world, there are not enough performing opportunities for kids in this area," she said. "Kids can't even audition for the Rainbow Theater competitions until they're 10 years old."



CARY EDMONDSON/NEWS STAFF PHOTO

Ellie Smith, bottom left, sits next to friends and family shortly after performing the national anthem before the start of a football game at Sam Boyd Stadium.

The Smiths usually have Ellie perform only patriotic songs or Broadway show tunes at her public appearances.

"We have to be careful. We try to find age-appropriate pop songs, but we try to protect her from the lyrics of some of them," Geri Smith said. "We have to screen her from television. Even with 'The Today Show' in the mornings, we have to be very careful."

Ellie's current favorite songs besides the national anthem are Barbra Streisand's rendition of "Don't Rain on My Parade" from the Broadway production "Funny Girl" and "River Deep, Mountain High," by Celine Dion.

Ellie sang Judy Garland's version of "Over the Rainbow" while sitting in the bleachers

of the UNLV game, without missing a note.

"I like ('American Idol' runner-up) Katherine McPhee's version, but I'm still learning that one," Ellie said. "I like watching American Idol, but my mom doesn't let me stay up to watch it that much."

Despite numerous successful performances at sporting events, stage and theater productions and first place finishes in singing competitions, Ellie hasn't decided that will be her future.

"I see singing as a hobby, but it could be a job," she said. "Because you can sing all over the country at, like, football games and stuff."

Ellie was asked what she thought about the challenges of being a kid today. She was

quick with her 10-year-old advice:

"Don't do drugs because you'll get addicted and then go crazy and probably die," Ellie explained, matter-of-factly. "Listen to your parents and never act too grown-up when you're not that grown-up because it gives you a bad reputation. If you're a singer and have a bad reputation or act up at auditions, they won't pick you."

"Always try your best in school and in everything you do, because if you act up in school you won't be able to go to college ... and you should go to college. And work hard to achieve your dreams."

Stacey Bonnar is a News correspondent.