
LAS VEGAS SUN

Born with the gift of song

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Ellie Smith - all 4 feet 7 inches of her - took the stage and launched into "Happy Days Are Here Again." When she finished, the MGM Grand Garden Arena erupted with applause as thousands of people rose to their feet.

Impresario David Foster, who had introduced the surprise performer at the Andre Agassi Grand Slam for Children concert, compared Ellie to Barbra Streisand and "American Idol" winner Kelly Clarkson.

Foster should know. The producer, composer and arranger has worked with such musical stars as Streisand, Celine Dion, Andrea Bocelli, Whitney Houston and Chicago. He discovered and nurtured the careers of many others, including Michael Buble and Josh Groban.

The 11-year-old from Henderson might one day receive Foster's golden touch.

"David says she's great," says Ellie's mom, Geri Smith. "But he can't do anything until she's 14. She's not marketable.

"At 11, there are only certain roles she can do, like 'Annie.' And there are only certain songs she can sing. So many are too suggestive for an 11-year-old."

Ellie's age might be holding her back, but not much. Life has turned into a whirlwind for the sixth-grade honor student at St. Viator Elementary School.

A week after the Agassi Grand Slam, she sang with Tony Bennett at Tao at the Venetian at a \$1,000-a-plate fundraiser. She's already shared the stage with Carlos Santana, Kelly Clarkson, Daryl Hall and John Oates.

She routinely sings "The Star-Spangled Banner" at sporting events. During her Christmas break she will sing at games for the Dallas Mavericks, Sacramento Kings, Phoenix Suns and Utah Jazz.

"The anthems have been her door to success," her mom says.

Ellie has performed it at racetracks, baseball and football games and many other events.

But Ellie isn't strictly an anthem performer. She sings the songs of Dion, Streisand and others at civic and charitable events and venues such as the Liberace Museum and the Bootlegger nightclub and restaurant.

She recently sang at a Las Vegas fundraiser for presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani, where she met Gov. Jim Gibbons.

Ellie takes it all in stride.

"I've just always been interested in singing," Ellie says.

She plays with her friends and her pets and fits a normal life around vocal coaches, dance lessons and singing engagements that are letting her see the country.

But while most children her age are playing with computers and neighborhood kids, Ellie is performing and rubbing elbows with legends.

"I like Celine Dion," she says. "I met her backstage last summer."

Ellie was a toddler when her mother recognized something special about her daughter.

"When she was 3 months old she could hum the melodies to Christmas carols she heard," Geri Smith says. Ellie sang her first national anthem at age 6.

"She has such a powerful voice," Smith says. "But she also has a beautiful soft voice. We're working to balance the two."

They're also working to balance her schedule. There's school, then two hours of homework and vocal lessons and dance lessons.

"We adhere to the schedule, but we maintain a balance," Smith says. "We'll go to Disneyland or do something else for fun."

Lisa Fairweather, musical director at St. Viator Catholic Church in Las Vegas, has been one of Ellie's vocal coaches for the past year.

"She has a natural gift," Fairweather says. "Not just to sing, but to interpret the songs that she sings."

"But overall, she's committed to her schoolwork."

Robert Marks, Ellie's vocal coach when she is in New York, says she is one of the best singers he has ever worked with in his 30 years of teaching. His students have included Britney Spears, Sarah Jessica Parker and Ashley Tisdale.

"Ellie has an extraordinary voice. A voice like hers comes along very rarely - her range and power are amazing and she is mesmerizing onstage," Marks says. "Her potential is limitless."

"Even without the training there's a natural gift there that can't be taught - she's got *it*."

There have been meetings in Los Angeles with songwriters and producers to discuss original songs for Ellie and Internet and DVD distribution, says her father, Rick Smith, a commercial real estate developer.

At this point, Ellie isn't sure what she's going to do with all that talent.

"I like musical theater," she says.

Broadway is a possibility.

"If it was the right role we would do it," her mother says. "But we would have to relocate the whole family."

"Like 'Mary Poppins'?" Ellie asks.

"Yes," her mom says. "But for children, contracts are usually for six months to a year."

She says the family is taking things as slowly as possible. There's plenty of time to think about the future, since Ellie still has to complete high school and college.

"Maybe New York University," Geri Smith says. "Her cousin attends there. They have a great musical theater department."

Geri Smith, a marriage counselor and therapist, doesn't consider herself a stage mother, just one committed to the well-being of her two daughters. Ellie's younger sister, 9-year-old Amy, receives as much attention for her dancing.

"I have a lot of flexibility in my private practice to devote time to both of my daughters," Geri Smith says.

But it's Ellie who is getting most of the public attention.

"I'm trying to make sure she's growing up normal," Geri Smith says. "She doesn't think of herself as a celebrity. She's very humble."

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