

Title:

And The Top 10, Too: From Chicken Soup For The American Idol Soul

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Summary:

Excerpt from Mandisa

American Idol Top 10, Season 5

It was the evening of January 17, 2006, and I was on cloud nine. The premier of American Idol's fifth season was about to air, featuring Chicago, my audition city. My friends, Chance and Jennifer, were hosting an American Idol premier party for me. They had made a fabulous feast and lit candles throughout the house, and more than twenty of my closest friends had gathered to celebrate and watch my debut. As I chattered ex...

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Article Body:

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It was the evening of January 17, 2006, and I was on cloud nine. The premier of American Idol's fifth season was about to air, featuring Chicago, my audition city. My friends, Chance and Jennifer, were hosting an American Idol premier party for me. They had made a fabulous feast and lit candles throughout the house, and more than twenty of my closest friends had gathered to celebrate and watch my debut. As I chattered excitedly with my friends, I felt like royalty. Chance had "crowned" me with a plastic tiara, while other friends had printed almost a hundred brown T-shirts that said, "Mandisa is my American Idol – All Hail the Diva," beneath a shining star.

The amazing thing was that none of them had even known whether I was still in the running. I already knew I'd been selected for the Top 44, but I hadn't been able to break my silence and share the news with my friends until tonight. When I did, the room erupted in cheers. I told them I wasn't sure if tonight's show would include my performance, but I had a strong positive feeling about it because I had seen commercials featuring my triumphant exit from the audition

room.

After dinner we moved into the family room, crowding onto the couch and filling every chair. When the American Idol theme song began, I almost pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Little Mandisa had finally found the courage to stand up, leave the house, and take a chance.

The minutes ticked by, and I kept wondering when my audition would come on. I barely noticed when the phone rang, but Chance pulled himself off the couch to answer it. A moment later I saw him signaling for my attention and felt a fleeting second of irritation. Whatever it was, couldn't it wait? Then I realized that something was up.

"That was Kevin on the phone," he said. "They're watching the show in real time. You just sang."

"So?"

"So, after you left the room, Simon said something rude about your weight."

I felt like I'd been slapped. Tears stung my eyes, and a sob stuck in my throat. My emotions, at a high pitch all day, now plummeted into despair. I thought about walking out the door and not coming back. Instead, I took a deep breath, thanked Chance for the warning, and rejoined the group. My friends barely noticed my return; they were so focused on the show. And then, there was my face filling the screen.

After just a few lines of my song, the judges stopped me. Paula, Randy, and Simon all said nice things and then announced they were sending me through to Hollywood. The camera zoomed in on my beaming face, and then showed me leaving the room in a joyous fit.

My friends exploded into cheers and applause as I tried to keep my chin from quivering. That day had been so good. Why had Simon gone and ruined it?

Only a few were still watching the screen when the camera zoomed back in on Simon, but those who saw my face quickly turned their attention back to the television. Before a national television audience, Simon looked at Paula and asked, "Are we going to get a bigger stage this year?"

Paula slapped him good-naturedly and said I reminded her of Frenchie Davis, a contestant from a previous season. Simon grinned and retorted, "She's more like France."

I tried to smile when the friends who'd heard Simon turned to look at me. "It's okay," I said, my voice shaking. "I'm okay."

Dead silence overtook the room. I looked down, not knowing how to react. I'd gone from my life's highest moment to one of its lowest.

One friend broke the silence. "Simon's a jerk," he said, and immediately others came to embrace me. I accepted the sympathy, but I really just wanted to disappear. We watched the rest of the show, but the gathering now felt more like a funeral wake than a party. Those "All Hail the Diva"" T-shirts, scattered throughout the room, seemed to mock me.

But little did I know that Simon's words would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. I now believe that if Simon had been uncharacteristically kind and never mentioned my obvious weight problem, I would never have been able to touch so many lives.

Make no mistake: Simon's words hurt me deeply. I cried myself to sleep that night. But as I wept, I realized what I had to do. The people on the receiving end of Simon's comments don't usually make it to Hollywood, so he never has to face them again. In my case, I made it to Hollywood, and once there, I knew that at the risk of not being put through to the Final 24, I had to be the voice of so many people who had been hurt by Simon and weren't able to tell him what his words had done to them. And I knew that I also had to be the voice for so many women who have been held back and told they weren't beautiful because of their weight.

I made it through every round during Hollywood Week, and when the day arrived that the Final 24 would be chosen, my childhood dream of becoming a world-class singer was within my grasp. But this was also my chance to share my truth with Simon. I knew the outcome could go either way, but I also knew that being true to myself was even more important to me than the possibility of becoming the next American Idol.

I heard my name called and, like a warrior marching to battle, I entered the elevator. And as the elevator doors opened, I started walking down the long stretch we called "The Green Mile" to the lone chair opposite the three judges. I sat down, looked Simon squarely in the eye, and began.

"Simon," I said, "a lot of people want me to say a lot of things to you right now, but this is what I want to say. I want you to know that you hurt me. I cried, and it was very emotional for me. But the good thing about forgiveness is

that you don't need someone to apologize in order to forgive them. So, Simon, I want you to know that I have forgiven you, because if Jesus could forgive me for all the things I've done wrong, I can certainly extend that same grace to you."

As I delivered my message, Simon's grin disappeared. Although I didn't take my gaze off Simon, from the corner of my eye I could see Randy raise his brows and Paula break into a smile as bright as the lights overhead.

In the silence that followed, Simon uncrossed his arms and hung his head. "Well, I feel about this big," he said, holding two fingers about an inch apart. "Mandisa, I'm humbled. Come here and give me a kiss."

I can't tell you how many women have shared what it meant to them that I refused to swallow his comments and just go on as if his words had never been spoken – and then forgave him as well. I just felt that if I didn't speak my truth, then his truth would have been the final word – and once again another woman who struggles with her weight would retreat with her head hanging and her heart broken. But I've always been a fighter, and my purpose in life is to shine through my integrity as well as my voice. I knew that I had to stand up for all women who struggle with their image, period.

I needed to say those words to Simon for me, but by doing so, I also hoped to help change the image of true beauty for all the young girls in our society. The possibility of realizing that goal made it worth the risk. And it continues to be worth it over and over again.

Last December, I was invited to tobyMac's Winter Wonder Slam Concert in Nashville. I was sitting in the audience when a mom and her two little girls came up to me. The precious girls, who I guess were about ten, stared at me with big brown eyes and nearly blinding smiles. Moved by their awe, I gave them each big hugs and signed the tickets they held in trembling, outstretched hands. Then one of the girls got up the courage to speak. She looked at me and proclaimed in a high-pitched voice, "You are sooooo beautiful!"

As I looked deeply into that young girl's eyes, I knew that I had changed her perception of beauty, and I hoped I had made the rest of her life a little easier for it.

As they turned to go, the mom stopped and whispered in my ear, "You have no idea what it means to me to have a role model like you – a woman who is not only beautiful, confident, and honest, but who also loves the Lord. Thank you for giving my girls someone in this crazy world that they can really look up to."

As they walked back to their seats, a huge smile took over my face, and I

thought to myself, That, and the Top 10, too.

(Reprinted with permission from Chicken Soup for the American Idol Soul: Stories from the Idols and their Fans that Open Your Heart and Make Your Soul Sing).

(Note to iSnare Editor: Our client Debra Poneman is author of the book Chicken Soup for the American Idol Soul. The book contains first person accounts of the hit TV show from contestants, fans and behind the scenes crew members. The piece above is from one of the contestants, Mandisa. We have Debra's permission to offer these excerpts from her book to iSnare. If you have any questions, please contact me at penny at amarketingexpert dot com.)