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## MEET THE CONTESTANTS

### SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bios



#### **"Spice Girls"**

##### **Dancers**

**Michelle Anderson, Naperville, IL**

**Rachel Giagnorio, Rolling Meadows, IL**

**Kelly Neville, Naperville, IL**

**Allison Ravn-Hansen, Bartlett, IL**

**Julia Smarto, Bartlett, IL**

Michelle Anderson, Rachel Giagnorio, Kelly Neville, Allison Ravn-Hansen, and Julia Smarto will add a lot of flavor to Special Talents America. Dancing to "Wannabe," they will perform as the

### Spice Girls – Baby, Scary, Ginger, Posh, and Sporty Spice!

Ranging in age from 17 to 21, the girls have been dancing together at Center Stage Dance Studio in Bloomingdale for several years. Some of their mothers met through the National Association for Down Syndrome (NADS) when their children were infants, and additional friendships were formed through the West Suburban Parent Support Group for Down Syndrome, their children's schools, and other activities.

The girls were part of a large performing troupe at Center Stage Dance Studio when instructor Candie Natale Schwaner decided to start a young adult group at the dance school last year. "The Spice Girls routine is one that they did in their class," explained one mother, Gail Anderson. "They're thrilled. All five of them enjoy performing and they are very proud of their ability to perform the routine." She added, "They all have followed some of the TV programs, so they understand the competition part of this event. It is a great opportunity for them to learn about all of the things that go into a competition – practicing a routine, learning how to audition. It is a fun experience for them."

It was one of the parents who suggested that the young women audition for Special Talents America, and Candie helped them perfect their dance performance.

Candie also credited Center Stage Dance Studio for being receptive to the idea of offering a class for dancers with disabilities. "Center Stage welcomed them with open arms! I have a nine-year-old brother with Down syndrome," she explained, "and he was my inspiration." She said that she was very proud of these young women when she learned they were finalists in the Special Talents America competition. "I set my expectations very high, but they always exceed them."

She added, "I feel that they have taught not only me, but all the dancers at the studio, more than I could teach them – that everyone can dance and everyone deserves the chance to try any kind of extracurricular activity and be part of a group. They bring awareness about the abilities of children with disabilities everywhere they perform."

When the performers were told that they were finalists in the four-state talent competition, they were all delighted. "It is going to be fun competing as the Spice Girls because we are all friends and have fun!" said Michelle Anderson.

Julia Smarto confided, "It means the world to me that my friends and I were chosen to be a part of Special Talents America! I can't wait to perform on November 5th!"

Kelly Neville happily exclaimed, "I always knew we were going to be stars!"

## SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio



**Michael Betka**  
**Dancer**  
**Mt. Pleasant, Michigan**

As a finalist in the Special Talents America competition, Michael Betka will delight attendees with his high-energy dancing and precision light-saber routine.

This young man from Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, has always enjoyed music. He plays the drums and keyboard and once took Suzuki piano lessons. But he recently admitted, "I like dancing mostly. I like it because I can be creative, not just with my feet but with the light stick, too. I can get my whole body moving."

According to his mother, Chris Betka, "Mike gets a lot of joy out of dancing. He is creative and likes making up his own dances." She explained that Michael buys a lot of new music and watches dance movies. "That's how he gets his ideas and his inspiration."

Michael is also a songwriter. "He's a guy who likes to put his feelings down and get them out that way," said Chris.

When asked to explain how music has been important in her son's life, she added, "Music has always been a real confidence booster for Michael. It is one of those very natural things for him. He started when he was very small with percussion – getting out the pots and pans. And some of the electronic instruments provided really good meter." She described how these early experiences evolved into dancing and said that Michael received a lot of praise for his performances. "You can see that spreading to other parts of his life."

In addition to music, Michael enjoys basketball and competed in the Summer Games in track and field.

What advice would his mother give to others who face personal challenges? "Not to limit anybody," she answered. "There are some materials that were given to us when he was born. The thinking was very different then. Very limiting. But we believed that he's going to be who he is going to be. He's a remarkable young man!"

## SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio



**Breanna Bogucki**

**Singer**

**Cary, Illinois**

Music has always touched Breanna Bogucki, now a freshman at Cary Grove High School in Illinois. According to her mother, Mary Ellen Bogucki, "Ever since she was an infant, music is the one thing she has connected with. It made a difference for her. It made her happy and was very calming for her."

"When she was little, Breanna would always sing," remembered Mary Ellen. "We signed her up for voice lessons through NISRA (Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association), and she loved it. Now she is starting high school and is in the choir."

"I think music has given meaning to her life," she added. "It calms her so much and gives her release when she is stressed. Music is her way of relaxing and calming down and finding peace. And that is what it gives her – peace."

When younger, Breanna was a big fan of Hannah Montana and dreamed of being like Miley Cyrus. NISRA once again provided opportunities for this talented young girl to develop her artistry. "This past year, she started doing musicals and plays through NISRA," explained her mother. "CYT Chicago partners with the special recreation groups throughout the northwest suburbs and helps them produce abbreviated versions of popular musicals. They've done 'Annie' and 'Fiddler on the Roof.'" Each participant has a role in which they sing, dance, and have a few speaking lines.

"The nice thing is that we had started Breanna doing individual things, such as Special Olympics with rhythmic gymnastics. This past year, she has been doing things as part of a group. That is giving her so much more. She is making friends and being successful at something she loves to do."

"Breanna really enjoys performing," her mother said proudly. "She gets such a feeling of love and feels that people like her. She is accepted. She is not judged for her disability."

In 2010, Breanna was one of the contestants in SRA's Got Talent, a statewide precursor to this year's Special Talents America. "It was such an incredible event," said Mary Ellen. "I don't think her feet touched the ground for weeks!" Family and friends kept looking in the NISRA catalog for two years, hoping that the competition would be repeated, and they were delighted to learn about this year's four-state talent event.

As a finalist, Breanna plans to sing "Mean," a song popularized by Taylor Swift, "That song has a lot of meaning to us," explained Mary Ellen. "No matter what you think of me, I am going to rise up and be somebody someday. That has become our personal anthem."

### **SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio**



**Cory Bollettino**  
**Singer**  
**Mt. Prospect, Illinois**

Special Talents America finalist Cory Bollettino is returning to the stage and planning to sing "Quando Me Enamoro" during the Special Talents America competition in Naperville on November 5th. Two years ago, with his heart-warming rendition of "Morning Has Broken" made popular by Cat Stevens, Cory was one of the performers at the statewide SRA's Got Talent competition, the precursor to this year's four-state contest. Cory is from Mt. Prospect, Illinois.

Visually impaired since birth and totally blind since he was nine years old, Cory has loved music since he was a toddler, tapping on the patio door and kitchen cabinets, keeping the beat as he sang his favorite songs. By the time he was seven, teachers had noted his beautiful voice and asked him to sing Andrea Bocelli's "Time to Say Goodbye" during a Mother's Day performance at the Northwest Special Recreation Association. He received a standing ovation.

This talented singer and composer is now a young adult who loves to entertain and share his music with his family, friends, and all who love music. Over the years, by recording music and radio programs, and by listening to the recordings repeatedly, he has taught himself lyrics, musical scores, the keyboard, and Italian. Already bilingual, Cory now performs a repertoire of songs in English, Spanish, and Italian. He has also developed an interest in playing the harp.

During one of his many hospitalizations due to severe migraine headaches, Cory was visited by Lutheran General's music therapist Soozie Cotter-Schaufele, who played the harp for him. She said, "The harp music seemed to relieve his pain and make him more comfortable." At Cory's request, the therapist continued to spend time sharing her knowledge of the harp with him. She observed, "Cory depends on music for his daily life. He is always aware of music and

sound. He definitely teaches me a lot about music and about life, to be more aware of my surroundings. He has taught me how music holds him through difficult times." She continued, "I am a music therapist. That is my world. But Cory lives in his relationship with music. He gets a lot of recognition for his beautiful voice. His perception of reality is a lot different – that inner trust about how things are. He helps other people, gives them beautiful music, and they help him."

According to Cory, "Music is peaceful, tranquil, such a beautiful thing to hear. If we had no music, we would have no soul. Music expresses what is in your heart."

## **SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio**



**Emily and Erika Cretens**  
**Singers**  
**Gladstone, Michigan**

Identical twins Emily and Erika Cretens have been singing since they first learned to walk. Born in Lansing, Michigan, they were part of the children's choir in their church before moving to the Upper Peninsula when they were five.

The twins later joined the choir in their new church where they enjoyed singing in front of the congregation. The girls' talent was nurtured in the choir, and today the young women give back to the community by performing at benefits for not-for-profit groups. They especially like to sing country music and the national anthem.

In fact, last spring, Emily and Erika received a call from the director of Bay Cliff Health Camp in Big Bay, Michigan, a camp on Lake Superior for children and adults with physical disabilities. The sisters were asked to sing the national anthem at a special fund-raiser, the Green Bay Packers Tailgate Tour. Their performance in front of 5,000 Packers fans in the Superior Dome in Marquette was so impressive that the team's president and CEO, Mark Murphy, invited the girls to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a preseason scrimmage game at Lambeau Field. "It was the experience of our lives!" exclaimed Erika. "We had a blast. To stand on a field with such history is priceless."

Raised by their father, Joseph, and paternal grandmother, Noma Cretens, the twins have

always turned to music to help them deal with the challenges caused by their disability, Fairbanks condition. "We are short and often have painful joints," commented Erika. "Music helped us get through those tough years, the bullying." She added, "Music helped us channel the emotions and pain. There is a healing power about music. It is a beautiful thing to me."

The twins are looking forward to traveling from their home in Gladstone, Michigan, to Naperville, Illinois, for the performance. At the Special Talents America competition they will be singing "Where Would You Be," a song recorded by one of their favorite country singers, Martina McBride.

When asked what they enjoy most about performing, Emily answered excitedly, "The crowd involvement! Just the exposure that we get and the crowd reaction. That shiver you get on the stage when the crowd roars."

### **SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio**



**Christine Honeywell**  
**Singer**  
**Vernon Hills, Illinois**

A recent graduate of Libertyville High School, Christine Honeywell has been singing since she was a young child. As a toddler, she watched Disney movies and quickly memorized every song. "She really has a talent in music," said her father, JP Honeywell. "It comes naturally for her." Her mom, Kathy, added, "It might sound like a joke, but it's not – Christine could sing before she could talk."

Christine joined Special Gifts Theatre in Northbrook when she was about eight years old and performed on stage with other young singers and thespians until recently. Over the years, she had parts in numerous musicals. She played the lead in "The Wizard of Oz" and "Cinderella" and strong supporting roles in "Annie," "High School Musical," and "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory."

According to her father, "She has never been afraid when someone asks her to get up and sing a song. She has no stage fright. She enjoys singing and performing. It makes her happy that her singing makes others happy."

Christine was a member of her high school choir for four years and was voted outstanding choir student by her peers. She has been singing 1st soprano in the Hope EPC Choir for the past 4 ½ years. She is also very active in the Special Recreation Association of Central Lake County (SRACLC). The teen has been involved in their dances, karaoke nights, and camp counselor training programs. It was through her local SRA that Christine first learned about the talent competitions.

Two years ago, Christine competed in SRA's Got Talent, the statewide precursor to this year's regional Special Talents America event. She moved the audience to tears with her rendition of "You Raise Me Up" and earned the top prize in the close competition against other very talented performers. When her voice teacher, Dr. Terry Martin, learned that Christine was going to compete again this year, he said, "I think I know just the song for her!" This year, Christine plans to sing "I Dreamed a Dream," from "Les Miserables."

### **SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio**



**Alec Hurtubise**  
**Singer/Banjo Player**  
**Zionsville, Indiana**

The Wentz Concert Hall will be jumping when 17-year-old Alec Hurtubise starts strumming his banjo and singing gospel bluegrass music at the Special Talents America competition in November!

The Zionsville Community High School student from central Indiana has been singing since he was a toddler. By the time Alec was eight, his much-admired uncle invited him to sing with the Cowboy Church Band. Alec really liked the sound of the banjo so his uncle began to teach him to play. Then, one Sunday a few years later, the band members surprised Alec with his own banjo during a church service. Discovering that he had natural talent with the instrument, the young boy took lessons and continued performing with the church band. The teen still sings and strums with that bluegrass band seven or eight times a year.

"Music has been all the world to me," explained Alec. "God gave me the talent, and I want to give all the credit to Him. That's how I came up with my own style of music."

Attending bluegrass festivals in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio has enriched Alec's life with friends and exciting experiences. "I travel around to all these bluegrass festivals and make a lot of friends," Alec said. "I've been to Mandolin Farm in Flemingsburg, Kentucky, and I sang with a lot of the greats of bluegrass there." Alec has performed with Ralph Stanley II, Paul Williams, Karl Shiflett, and Goldwing Express, who are some of his favorites.

According to his mother, Lisa Hurtubise, "The older performers like to get the younger people involved in bluegrass music to keep it alive. A couple of weeks ago, we were at a festival, sitting on a log cabin porch, and everyone took out their instruments and started to play. Alec sat around jamming with them. Later, someone asked him to play in his band as a substitute banjo player."

"I can't imagine Alec not having music," confided Lisa. "This is his thing. It has given him purpose. He lives for it. It's that 'one thing' that parents of kids with autism are searching for for their kids. They say he is so lucky that he has something he is interested in." Two months ago, Alec recorded his first CD, "The Sound of Mountain Gospel."

Alec is also involved in a variety of other activities, including Special Olympics and the Best Buddies program at his high school.

When asked what advice he would give to anyone wanting to pursue music, he answered, "I would give them advice about taking their time when they first learn to play an instrument. Take your time. Learn to do it right."

### **SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio**



**Kari Kinnett**  
**Singer/Keyboardist**  
**Villa Grove, Illinois**

"I don't know what I would do if it was not for music!" exclaimed 22-year-old Kari Kinnett of Villa Grove, Illinois. "I don't know how else to express my feelings, my emotions, what I am going through."

This talented young woman was born prematurely at 25 weeks in Guam, where her parents were both serving in the military. As a result, she was born with retinopathy of prematurity and is totally blind. She also has autism and is a savant.

Kari's mother, Amy Kinnett, described the fascinating musical journey of her remarkable child. "At the age of two Kari was in a recording studio. We actually have a recording of her singing. At the age of three, she was playing 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' and 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star' on her Fisher-Price piano. On her fifth birthday, her grandparents gave her a Casio keyboard, and she taught herself various tempos and rhythms." Amy continued, "Kari first performed in church, singing and playing the keyboard, when she was six or seven. It grew from there." Mother and daughter then started singing at Lions Club meetings and civic events. By the time the young girl was nine, she had won a national talent competition.

Music became Kari's special niche, and it has helped her relate to people. She especially enjoys karaoke with its audience participation and the feedback she receives. Amy noted, "You can see from her face and reactions that she is loving every minute of it!"

When asked what advice she would give to others who face personal challenges in their lives, she answered, "If you are willing to show your talents to others, don't be afraid to do so. Don't hesitate. Don't be shy. Just be as brave as you can." She added, "I think the most important thing is if you are happy and treat others the way you want to be treated."

## **SPECIAL TALENTS AMERICA – Contestant Bio**



**Mia Strayer**  
**Harpist**  
**Cherry Valley, Illinois**

When Patricia Strayer gave her teenage daughter, Mia, a Christmas harp music CD seven years ago, she didn't know that the gift would change her daughter's life. But it has.

After listening to the CD constantly for a year, and after asking her parents three times for harp lessons, Mia received an Irish harp from her parents and began taking harp lessons. When her first teacher, Gina McClancy, moved to Arizona, Mia continued lessons with Nanette Felix, the

principal harpist for the Rockford Symphony Orchestra. During the summer, Mia auditioned for Special Talents America, playing "The Prayer" on her pedal harp. In November, this vivacious young woman will compete as a finalist in the four-state Special Talents America competition at Wentz Concert Hall and Fine Arts Center in Naperville, Illinois, before a live audience.

Although most people would find it a major challenge to simply learn to play the 44-string concert harp, it was a minor hurdle for Mia – compared to the other obstacles she has faced. Not only does Mia have cerebral palsy, she also is visually impaired. She openly described her eyesight, saying, "I can't see out of my right eye. But my left eye sees enough so I can see the color strings on the harp. I basically have to learn all the music by ear." Mia is a graduate of Illinois School for the Visually Impaired in Jacksonville, Illinois.

"Music has changed my life," she admitted. "I'm always cranking up the tunes in the car – Celtic Woman and stuff like that – classical and Christian music. I love music. I listen to it on my iPad and in the car. Sometimes it hits a string in my heart and makes me cry."

According to harpist Nanette Felix, "Mia continually amazes me with her accomplishments. Because of her sight limitations we cannot read music, so rhythms and phrases are all memorized. Her locked finger joints create new challenges for the traditional harp techniques that are generally taught. We create new patterns that work for her tiny fingers. She is always ready to try new things." Felix added, "I believe Mia is a shining star from God. She emits such a unique aura. Everyone she comes in contact with is positively affected within seconds. Mia has definitely changed how I look at life."

A resident of Cherry Valley, Illinois, twenty-one-year-old Mia was born in Romania. "She was a crib baby," explained her adoptive mother, Patricia Strayer. "She was in a crib with several other children. When we got her she weighed about 16 pounds. Although no one knew exactly when she was born, doctors believe that she was three years old when she came to the United States." After Mia came to this country and lived with the Strayers, she learned how to crawl and then how to walk. "The neat thing about her story is there was a cleaning lady who went back to the orphanage every day and would rub their backs," Patricia continued. "The woman who brought them to the United States remembered seeing the woman doing this. It was the only human touching they had."

When asked what advice she would give to others, Mia answered, "I'm not handy with advice. I think they should stick with what they like. If it takes a thousand times, go for it! Maybe God will lead them to their instrument, like God did me and the harp."