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The power of self-esteem and dreams

15-year-old singer, actor switching gears to focus on academics

BY TOM LOUNGES

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The late James Brown once dropped to his knees and shouted, "This is a man's world ..."

But don't try to lay that line on Susan May, because she won't buy it.

May has proven otherwise many times in her 15 years.

And she continues to do so.

When most girls her age are thinking about what to wear to their first homecoming dance, May is cracking books as a freshman at Valparaiso University, after having accelerated herself academically into college years earlier than her peers through an aggressive regiment of home schooling.

This St. John resident has proven herself to be a "can do" girl over the years, by tackling one challenge after another, and always come out smelling like the title of her national debut album, "The Rose."

Her drive, determination and self-esteem make May a wonderful role model for other youngsters -- female and male -- who dare to dream dreams and who aspire to accomplish things against all odds.

Susan May is the professional name used by Susan Wiltrakis -- daughter of Lynn and Nida Wiltrakis -- who aside from being a pre-med student is also a teenage jazz recording artist and part-time film/stage actress, successful enough to already have been an invited guest on "Oprah."

May also has appeared on Chicago morning news programs aired on FOX-TV, CBS-2 and ABC-7, along with guest shots on assorted radio programs.

While there have been many variables that have contributed to her success, the most important can be defined in one word -- "faith," the faith she has had in herself and the faith others have had in her.

"My family has always encouraged me to chase my dreams and not to be afraid to reach for the stars," she said in our first interview when she was only 12 and fresh from singing a Hungarian love song with the Northwest Indiana Symphony.

"They have always been supportive and helped me believe that I could succeed. You never know if you can succeed at something if you never try," May said.

That encouragement, coupled with her own strong will, has taken the teenager down many roads and given her wonderful experiences since she first began singing and dancing as a toddler.

She cites Katherine Hepburn as her acting idol and has emulated "Kate" on stages ranging from the Centre For The Performing Arts in Munster to those of the Lyric Opera, The Shakespeare Theatre in Chicago and the city's European Repertory Co.

While she still loves theater, jazz singing has been May's primary passion ever since A&R folks of

Southport Records caught her singing in a stage production of "Gypsy," and signed her to a recording contract.

Why jazz? "It's just wonderful music. It's really loose and relaxed," she said, citing her mother's jazz album collection as being her first introduction to music.

"I just love Ella Fitzgerald, and I really respect the work of Judy Garland," she said.

May has recorded and released two amazing albums of jazz standards -- 2003's "The Rose" and 2005's "Black Coffee" -- with her musical director Bobby Schiff.

Backed instrumentally by pianist Schiff, bassist Jimmy Cox and drummer Leon Joyce (also the beat keeper for Chicago jazz legend Ramsey Lewis), May has performed at the Chicago Jazz Festival in Grant Park, and such prestigious live music venues as The Jazz Showcase, Royal George, Andy's Jazz Club, Star Plaza Theatre and the Apollo Theater.

"I've never been pushed or pressured by anyone to do anything," the teenage dynamo said of not having had a typical teenage life. "I love what I've done and what I'm doing. I'd never change a thing. I've had some incredible experiences and I've gotten to know some amazingly talented people along the way."

Just as singing jazz classics like Ray Noble's "The Very Thought Of You," Gershwin's "Embraceable You" and Johnny Mercer's "Come Rain Or Come Shine" took priority over her acting, May has put her music career on the back burner in favor of her college studies.

"Obviously, I am still doing some shows and still singing," she said while preparing for a holiday concert this past December at Indiana Northwest University. "But I'm cutting back on performing quite a bit to focus on school right now."

May's newest dream and perhaps her greatest challenge to date, is to become a pediatric reconstructive plastic surgeon, helping kids with birth deformities and those who are burn and accident victims.

"I've always been fascinated with the medical field and I love children," she said, fully realizing that helping kids with these special problems also will make them feel good about themselves. "I want to help kids and make a difference in their lives."

Until securing her degree in a few years enables that to happen, May is happy to know that her gift of song can help her make a difference in young lives.

"I was called (last week) and asked to be part of a pediatric cancer benefit this October out in Carmel, Calif. that will raise funds for The Ewing Research Foundation," May said. "There will be several young performers taking part in it and I'm honored to have been asked."

FYI: www.susanmay.com

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