

In a moment's time, the singing duo would face the searing lights of the television cameras. By the end of the evening, they would know whether they had reached the semi-finals.

Huddled in the darkness of the wings, Ashlee Renee and Olanna clasped their hands together and prayed as they always did before singing. "Lord God, we dedicate our performance to You. May the Holy Spirit touch the hearts of those who hear our music. In Jesus' name, we pray."

No sooner did the "Amen" leave their lips than thunderous applause rang out. As they stepped onstage, the host of NBC's *America's Got Talent* announced, "Let's give it up tonight for the opera duo, ACTE II!"



**A**s children of God, we know that He uses everyday, common things in our lives to bring us closer to Him — simple water, bread and wine, together with His Word, as the Means of Grace. He may use a job transfer, a sick loved one, or a wrong number to alter our plans to follow His path. Sometimes He puts us in just the right place at the right time or introduces us to a person who will have an impact on our lives.

This is clearly how it worked for Ashley Renee Watkins.

*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11\*).*

Family and music were the center of Ashley Renee's life in New Orleans where she grew up with her mother, father, and older brother. She learned to sing at her grandmother's bedside and later sang hymns in the Baptist church, where her father was a minister and she was a part of the choir. She enjoyed singing, "but I never felt my singing was amazing or anything."

When Ashley Renee attended St. Paul Lutheran School, New Orleans, she learned a different style of singing, more "heady" than gospel-style. It was comfortable for her. As a high school freshman, she was one of a few accepted into the advanced choir. "We sang gospel, spiritual, classical pieces. I started to explore the versatility of music."

*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened (Matthew 7:7-8).*

An unexpected opportunity presented itself when Ashley Renee was given a solo in a musical. A friend, the director of her church youth choir, heard her sing and introduced her to his college voice teacher, Dr. Karen Johnson, at Dillard University, who believed

she had a natural voice for opera. "My mind was blown," Ashley Renee said. "This whole time I was planning to go to college to be a veterinarian."

Ashley Renee knew it wouldn't be easy for her to get into college, no matter what field of study she wanted. Not only was her financial situation grim, but also her ACT score was low despite excellent grades. Nevertheless, Ashley Renee visited Dillard and was offered a music scholarship with one catch — she had to major in music and give up her dream of becoming a veterinarian.

Her mother, Lolita Watkins, assured her, "I'm behind you one-hundred percent in whatever you want to do." As much as it terrified Ashley Renee to be a music major — and still not confident with her singing voice — she accepted the Dillard scholarship, planned to major in music business, and set out on the first stepping stone of the long path.

*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).*

At Dillard, Dr. Johnson encouraged Ashley Renee to focus instead on music performance. She urged her to transfer to a university with a stronger music program and a performance degree. But Ashley Renee didn't want to transfer. Dillard had become comfortable. Unknown to Ashley Renee, a life-altering event loomed on the horizon.

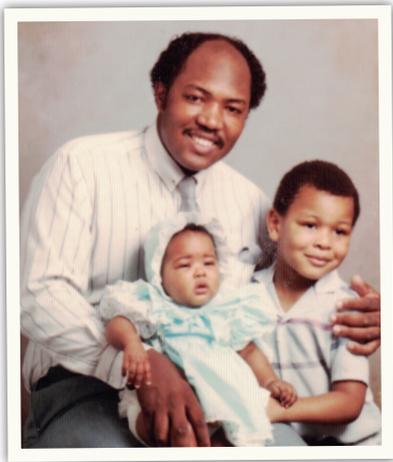
In August 2005, as she was starting her senior year of college, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast and forced Ashley Renee, her brother, and mother — along with their cat, Jade — to evacuate. The family made it safely to Baton Rouge, but the city had no power and no phone service. They couldn't let anyone know they had made it out of New Orleans safely, including Ashley Renee's father.



# Ashley Renee

## MILESTONES TO A CLASS ACTE

*by Becky Wehrspann, Features Editor*



One-year-old Ashley Renee with her father and big brother, Charles

For the first time in their lives, they found themselves with no money and no clothes. A cousin, stationed in the military at nearby Fort Polk, generously gave them funds to buy necessities, gas up the car, and get to Texas.

“Everybody else looks at Katrina as a bad thing,” Mrs. Watkins says, “but I don’t. The plan was when [my children] finished school, I was going to move to Texas, because my sister was already there. When Katrina hit, it was like ‘Okay, God, You’re just speeding up the process for us.’ It wasn’t a hardship for me. It was a plan that God already had in motion for us.”

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).*

Reality hit. Ashley Renee conceded that she would not be returning to New Orleans or to Dillard to finish her last year of college. Unfortunately, many schools in Texas were no longer accepting new students. Although she and her mother visited a small, liberal arts college willing to take new students, the school was only offering music education. Ashley Renee remembers bursting into tears. “This was my only option, and I didn’t want to go here.” They left the campus with Ashley Renee in a panic, as the semester was ticking by and she was still not enrolled in college.

An unexpected phone call from someone she barely knew at Dillard changed her course of action. This person got in touch with her through calling her aunt’s phone number. Mrs. Watkins remembers the phone call, “I don’t know how this person got my sister’s number. To this day I do not know how she found Ashley, but she did and she left this message: ‘Get to the University of Oklahoma in Norman because they are accepting new students.’”

“Oklahoma seemed huge and strange to me,” Ashley Renee remembers, but she transferred and majored in music performance, just what she had avoided for more than three years at Dillard.

Who made that call and encouraged Ashley Renee to transfer? Olanna Goudeau, the woman who would become her singing partner and friend.

*And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them (Isaiah 42:16).*

“My whole world opened up. I was finally at the type of program that my first voice teacher had urged me to go to the whole time.”

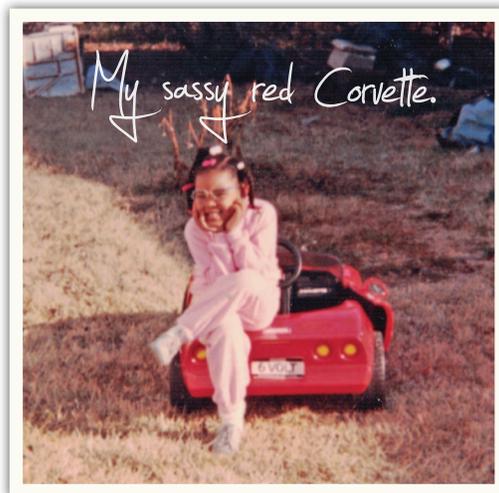
But the transition was difficult. At Dillard, she’d had solos in the choir, was in the female quartet, and had just been elected the president of the choir. At OU, she had to start all over again, learning a whole new technique and a new repertoire of music. She was adjusting to living with roommates in an apartment. During this time, she and Olanna Goudeau developed a close friendship, clinging to each other and bonding over this new chapter in their lives.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills — where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1–2).*

With the guidance of Dr. Donna Mitchell-Cox, she worked her way up in the music program, going from the new girl to one of the most-used voices in the department. “But that was years of prayer, hard work, and a very good voice teacher guiding me the whole time,” she says.

Opportunities continued. Twice a year at OU, opera singer Marilyn Horne led masterclasses and private lessons. Ashley Renee attended, hoping one day to be chosen to sing for Ms. Horne. That one day arrived — three times! She was invited two summers in a row to Ms. Horne’s voice program in Santa Barbara, California, and sang at a masterclass at Carnegie Hall in New York City with Ms. Horne. “It’s something really to be grateful for.”

During her years at the University of Oklahoma, Ashley Renee and Olanna stayed in contact, but a misunderstanding threatened their friendship. These friends parted ways. Olanna got married, graduated, and moved to New York. Ashley Renee was still finishing her master’s degree in Oklahoma and, although there was “some kind of a connection” between them, they lost touch with one another.



Five-year-old Ashley Renee and her first car. She admits, “I was mostly terrified to drive it, but I did look good posing by it!”



Ashley Renee and her mother, Lolita (“I get my looks from her, and her wisdom is endless.”), Charles, and his wife, Tiffany

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After she finished her master’s degree in December 2009, Ashley Renee was accepted to the Opera New Jersey summer program and began to prepare for the eventual masterclasses and an opera chorus. As it turned out, Olanna was accepted to the same program. There wasn’t much excitement about the prospect of their meeting again.

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* (Romans 11:33)

Together that summer, Ashley Renee and Olanna reopened the lines of communication with each other. “We both had been holding a grudge and blaming each other for something we just needed to talk about. We started the healing process of our friendship,” Ashley Renee says.

The summer program was successful, but she didn’t have the money — or a job — to move to New York as she had hoped. Instead, Ashley Renee moved in with her mother in Texas, went through a period of depression, and seriously considered giving up her dream of singing. Although she worked out a lot and lost nearly 70 pounds, she was very unhappy. “I just did not want to be in Dallas. I wanted to be in New York.”

Ashley Renee’s mother remembers that time in her daughter’s life. “I always told her, ‘giving up is not an option.’”

At that same time, her mother was just beginning to get involved with the LWML at St. Paul Lutheran Church, and Ashley Renee was invited to sing at area LWML rallies. Singing provided an opportunity for her to share her voice and get to know the women of St. Paul.

Soon after, she stepped out again and applied for the Fort Worth Opera Chorus. One night after she had been singing with the chorus, a man approached her and said, “You have so much potential. Who are you studying with?” Ashley Renee was shocked because she had been suffering with acid reflux and wasn’t happy with her sound. Studying with? She wasn’t even taking voice lessons!

The gentleman was J. David Brock, head of the voice department at Texas Christian University, who “blessed me with lessons that I could afford.” He encouraged Ashley Renee to audition for AIMS (American Institute of Musical Studies), which takes place in Austria every summer. Upon her acceptance, she was responsible for raising all her funds to attend. St. Paul Lutheran Church in Dallas helped her reach her fundraising goals. “When I was getting ready to go to AIMS in 2011, the church stepped up and had all kinds of fundraisers to help me go to the summer program. It was very humbling,” she says.

That summer, Ashley Renee traveled to Graz, Austria, sang in orchestra concerts and small programs, and was a finalist in the vocal competition “a year after I almost stopped singing.”

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights* (James 1:17a).

After returning to Dallas, she learned that Big Thought, an after-school program, was hiring a Teacher Artist Fellow. “I had never done teaching artistry. I’d never considered myself a teaching artist.” But Ashley Renee was accepted for the fellowship position, which was mentored by Eric Booth, internationally known as the father of teaching artistry. She now had a full-time job with benefits and a salary and could save the money she needed to pursue her dream once again of moving to New York.

In 2013, while working at Big Thought on a collaboration with other artists to produce after-school programming, Ashley Renee called Olanna in New York — the two were continuing their reconciliation — and they decided to start doing benefit concerts together for kids, families, and adults.

“When a misunderstanding threatens your friendship, God has to stay at the center to keep you focused on the fact that He has you together, that He put you together ... That’s something that we both hold on to.”

As Ashley Renee and Olanna worked together, they focused on developing a duo. Big Thought was a perfect outlet for their launch; it forced them to form their LLC, open a business account, write a mission statement, and present themselves as a program. Their ultimate goal was to tour Germany.

ACTE II was born.

*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you* (Matthew 6:33).

Excitement grew as they set concert dates. Their first was scheduled in New York City when Ashley Renee had already planned to be in town for other auditions. “I was trying to hit all the birds I could with one stone,” she says. Then something completely unexpected happened.

Olanna heard about NBC’s *America’s Got Talent* (AGT) holding auditions in New York City on the very same weekend Ashley Renee would be in town for their first concert. ACTE II performed a private audition for AGT, and the judges loved them. The next week they performed their official debut concert in Harlem, before Ashley Renee returned to Dallas and her work at Big Thought.



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“We had this big thing looming over us,” she says. “What if we get picked for the show? Then we aren’t going to get to Germany like we planned. Maybe we should just wait and see what God says. So that’s what we did. We just waited. We didn’t make any further plans. We just waited,” Ashley Renee remembers.

*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord (Psalm 27:14 NIV).*

Back in Dallas, Ashley Renee still held her goal of moving to New York but, without ACTE II generating an income, she had to remain at Big Thought. Through her work there, she made connections with Lincoln Center Education in New York City and was accepted as Teaching Artist Faculty. She finally had a reason — and a resource — to make her dream move! But that was not all.

On July 28, 2014, *America’s Got Talent* flew Ashley Renee to New York to perform in the live quarterfinals at Radio City Music Hall.

That memorable summer evening, even though ACTE II performed gallantly on Radio City’s renowned stage, the duo didn’t make it past the quarterfinals. Nevertheless, their appearance on *AGT* launched them “into the mainstream” and gave them opportunities to share their voices and serve in communities all across the United States.

Church has always been an important part of Ashley Renee’s life. Although she grew up going to the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) church and the Baptist church, where her father was a minister, she also attended St. Paul Lutheran School, New Orleans, for four years and visited Trinity Lutheran with her brother. She now considers St. Paul Lutheran in Dallas, where her mother is the Vice President of the LWML, to be her home church. “It’s a newer relationship (with the LWML). But it’s one I’m really excited about,” Ashley Renee says. “It’s getting more people involved in an important ministry. I’m excited to see how they can grow on this outreach they’re doing and go further with it into mission work.”

*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Hebrews 13:16).*

Last spring, ACTE II presented a concert at Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital. They sang Disney tunes and pop songs — music the kids would like and could sing along to. One young boy told his mom he had to be at the concert, not just watch it

live-streamed in his room. “He said to me, ‘Can I touch you? Are you real?’” Ashley Renee remembers. The boy walked from his wheelchair to the piano, which brought his mom to tears, since he’d been so sick lately he hadn’t been walking. “Our concert had moved him — for a moment — to live in whatever joy he was experiencing. I was taking that for granted.”

The duo has since toured with American Spiritual Ensemble, traveled to Greece, and participated in numerous charity events in New York City, New Orleans, Dallas, and other communities. A concert tour is being scheduled for 2017.

In the midst of all this, they make time to be in God’s Word and prayer together. “We meet during the week with another friend and have prayer and Bible study. We pay very close attention to keeping God at the forefront. It has to be a priority.” And those performances, whether in a small church or on a large stage, are the mission field for ACTE II. “We don’t do any performance without praying — and if we forget, we notice that we did. We acknowledge that God is in control.”

Ashley Renee continues, “The Lord is my foundation, and everything I do is for the Kingdom of God. He gives me purpose in life. Without having Him at the center, I’d just be making noise when I open my mouth to sing.”

Ashley Renee and Olanna have shared many of life’s ups and downs: planning their own concerts, scheduling tours, and preparing to release their first CD later in 2016. All of it has brought them closer together and closer to God. “We’re much more than singing partners. We’re friends. We’re very close — we’re sisters. We keep each other accountable. We both recognize the walk — each other’s walk — that we have with Christ. I never have to hesitate to bring up the goodness of God. When we are struggling, it’s never too much to bring up God and His power and His love.”

With each milestone in her life, God’s Word has been Ashley Renee’s guide: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).* “This verse speaks to me as a human, a woman, a child of God, and an artist. Even in the darkest times or the roughest of patches, joy is always on the horizon, and God’s glory is always waiting to burst through.” **Q**

\*All Scripture verses are taken from ESV unless otherwise indicated.