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Millville native Amanda Mograss performs on 'American Idol.'

Local performer has brush with fame on 'American Idol'

By STELLA LORENCE
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MILLVILLE – Singing in front of children and their families on a Polar Express train car is a little different from singing in front of three celebrity judges on national television, but Amanda Mograss made that leap.

Mograss, who grew up in Millville, made it through several rounds of auditions to perform for “Hollywood Week” on season 22 of ABC’s reality singing contest “American Idol.” Though she stumbled a little in her performance of Lady Gaga’s song “A Million Reasons,” Mograss said she’s grateful for the experience and she’ll be back.

“I didn’t know I wasn’t ready,” she told The Call &

Times. “I actually do plan on going back. It was a really good experience. I’ve gained a lot of supporters.”

Mograss said she grew up singing and performing. She was “always in chorus” and had acts and solos in several talent shows and cabarets throughout middle school.

“I had a lot of confidence as a kid. I performed a lot,” she said.”

In high school, she continued to sing but shifted her focus to cheerleading, which she said built up her confidence performing in front of crowds. Her commitment to cheerleading also set her up to perform the National Anthem for regional sporting events and the Memorial Day parade in Blackstone, Mass.

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Then she joined School of Rock in Attleboro, which had just opened in early 2016.

"That changed my life," Mograss recalled. "It put me down the path I wanted to be on."

As the name suggests, School of Rock gave Mograss her first big introduction to the genre of classic rock, which she found fitting for her vocal range. She continued lessons for two years until she graduated from the program at age 18.

"American Idol" wasn't Mograss's first time auditioning for a singing competition television show. In college, she did an in-person audition for a spot on NBC's "The Voice," where celebrity judges hear blind auditions and "spin their chairs" to draft a team of musicians to coach.

"It was terrifying and I didn't make it through anything," Mograss said of that audition.

So, she kept taking singing lessons and eventually joined a band called "All That," which played just about every type of music. After about two and half years of singing with the band, she realized she really liked the rock genre. The band was committed to variety, so she formed her own rock band, Platinum Thrill.

Because of her experience auditioning for "The Voice," Mograss said she didn't have high hopes when she filled out the online form and submitted a video demo to take part in "American Idol" auditions.

"I told nobody about that," she said. "I refused to tell anybody I tried out because I didn't want anything to influence me."

It was so long before she heard back that she almost forgot about signing up. Then she got an email saying her audition was the following day.

She auditioned live on Zoom for a producer of the show. After waiting in a virtual waiting room for an hour, she sang Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart," a song she chose because she'd been performing it frequently with her band

and it was always "a crowd-pleasing favorite." She said after her audition, the producer told her he was putting her through to the next round.

She switched to another Zoom call labeled "Winners' Circle" and was asked to sing again for more producers. They told her they'd call back in about two weeks, but ended up calling back right away. She was asked to sing another couple songs to a track, and she chose "Heartbreaker" by Pat Benatar and "Sweet Child of Mine," which was a mistake because of the long guitar solo, she said.

After auditioning a second time, Mograss was asked to send in three videos of her singing and one of them had to be a video of a live performance. The producers called her again soon after she submitted the videos and set up another Zoom audition for the following day.

Mograss sang "Piece of My Heart" again, and a new producer told her it seemed like she was holding back, Mograss said. So when she sang "Heartbreaker," she went all in.

"I did what I would do if I was in the band," she said.

Mograss said she's always been known in her band and in her job performing on the Polar Express as an "energized and youthful" performer, not just a singer. That's how she wanted to come across to the producers when she performed her second song. After she was done, they told her they were sending her to Los Angeles to audition in front of the celebrity judges, Lionel Richie, Luke Bryan and Katy Perry.

"At that point, I don't remember anything because I was screaming and crying," she said.

The time between her audition and the trip to L.A. was filled with meetings, interviews, contracts and other preparation. Mograss said the show covered her hotel expenses but not her plane ticket. Her boss, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Bob Billington, stepped in to help her cover it.

"I'm very, very grateful for that," she said, noting

she might not otherwise have been able to go.

The audition process in L.A. was a lot of long days full of waiting, she said. Contestants had to be show-ready by 7 a.m. and look the same every day so the episode would appear like it was all filmed on the same day. There were a lot of interviews and pictures, and on the first day of auditions, a wind storm threw a wrench into the carefully planned production schedule.

"You were always on camera," Mograss said. "There was never a time you could sit down and relax."

After growing up watching the show with parents who are big fans, she said it was "weird" to see behind the scenes at how reality television is made. Some things were more "casual" than she would have expected, and the judges and other contestants who seem larger than life in the finished episodes are all "just humans," she said.

She made friends with many of those other contestants during rehearsals, including some people she recognized from social media.

"I met some of the most incredible people of my life," she said. "I was your basic everyday Rhode Island chick who just got there. It was really cool to see them and be on that level with them."

Her mom and her guitar player, Scott Motyka, came with her on the trip and Motyka accompanied her in the audition. They called her in on the second day.

"All of a sudden, I was talking to Ryan Seacrest," she said, adding that she remembers watching the 20-plus-year veteran of the show host it when she was a kid. "He was super awesome, super energetic and kind."

When the audition start-

ed, Mograss said she was "so confident" up until she started singing. The audition room was bright like waking up on a snow day, she said, and "Katy Perry has very big blue eyes" fixed on each contestant in an intense stare.

After she sang her audition pieces, the judges told her to tone it down, she said, which threw her off since the producers had said to give it her all. They asked her to sing something softer and more modern, even though she had prepared three classic rock songs. After a bit of back and forth, she settled on "Hello" by Adele, which she sang a capella while Perry urged her to try it again and again, softer each time.

Ultimately, Katy Perry and Luke Bryan voted to send her to Hollywood, and she said Lionel Richie gave her a "constructive no" only because she didn't need his vote to advance. She left the audition room with her "golden ticket" and "cried hysterically," she said.

But because the show is prerecorded and wouldn't air for months, she then had to go home and "act like that didn't happen." She went back to L.A. in December to record the "Hollywood Week" audition.

"They called this bootcamp," she said. "It was singers' bootcamp."

The 143 singers who made it that far had more long days on set rehearsing and recording, even though only about 10% of the auditions are shown in the final episode. Mograss said the experience was especially nerve-wracking because the auditions took place not just in front of the celebrity judges, but in front of every other contestant too.

After busy days with little time to eat or drink

water, Mograss said she wasn't feeling her best. When it was her turn, she stumbled on the lyrics.

"I went up there and I don't remember a lick of anything that happened except I choked."

After the audition, she told Seacrest she got inside her head after watching everyone else audition before her.

"I have seen an incredible amount of talent today and I think I compared myself a little bit and freaked out," she says in the episode, which aired on ABC on Sunday.

She had already begun to accept that she would be sent home, she said, but when the decision became official, the turnaround for her to pack her bags and leave L.A. was too tight for her to say goodbye to the friends she had made.

"I would've preferred to have been on the edge of my seat," she said about the results, but added that there's some consolation in the fact that she wasn't sent home because the judges didn't like her voice.

Still, she said it was a huge learning experience that she's incredibly grateful for.

"Thank you American Idol for bringing my dreams to life," she wrote on social media after the episode aired. "This isn't

the end for me... but only the beginning!"

Now Mograss is back in Millville, still working at the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council and performing with Platinum Thrill. She said she definitely wants to try auditioning again, but maybe not this year since she's still working on getting her performance anxiety under control and building self confidence.

Mograss encouraged anyone who missed her episode - or saw it and wants to see more - to check out her and Platinum Thrill on social media @amograss99 and @platinumthrillrocks to find out about upcoming live shows.

COASTAL CREDIT UNION NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Shareholders of the Coastal Credit Union will be held Monday, April 15, 2024 at 9:30 a.m. in the Atrium Room at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, 801 Greenwich Avenue, Warwick, RI for the Presentation of the Annual Reports, Election of Directors and to transact such other business as may legally be presented to said meeting.

Paul F. Lefebvre Secretary
April 1, 2024

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