

HOMETOWN

# Superstars

*Sugar Land Superstar  
Melanie Finley*



# Local Singing Sensations Compete at Sugar Land Town Square Competition

Written by Crystal Rawls



The community goes crazy for this annual competition



Yolanda Green, Craig DeSerf, and T.J. Callahan served as this year's judges

On a hot August evening, in the shadow of City Hall, ten of Fort Bend County's most talented singers belted it out in hopes of being crowned Sugar Land's Superstar. Only one was awarded the honor, but all ten counted the experience as an unforgettable adventure.

## The Contest

Now in its third season, Town Square's Superstar contest has attracted thousands of fans to the center of Sugar Land to hear stellar performers compete for the ultimate title. "I developed the contest because of American Idol's popularity, of course. But I had no idea our talent would be as good, if not better, than American Idol," says Sugar Land Town Square Marketing and Event Manager and contest creator Rita Sosebee.

Superstar co-host and KHMx radio personality Michelle Fisher was impressed with the inspired performances as well as the growing audience. "It's just the coolest thing to look out in front of City Hall and see a thousand people, from all over Fort Bend, complete strangers, who have gathered together to support these people in their community," says Fisher. "And then the surprise on their faces when they realize the magnitude of talent these contestants have. It's wonderful and I'm so proud to be a part of it."

Fellow co-host, High-Tech Texan Michael Garfield, shares Fisher's pride and marvels at Sugar Land's community spirit. "Events like Sugar Land Superstar add a great family ambiance to the community and I am proud to play a role in making this event and the community a bigger success," says Garfield.

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Fitness Trainer Elaine Pangle

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## SUGAR LAND SUPERSTARS

### *The Top Ten*

#### THE SUPERSTAR

*Melanie Finley*

#### 1ST RUNNER UP

*Meagan Whitfield*

#### 2ND RUNNER UP

*Renee Miura*

#### THE FINALISTS

*Anik Bhattacharya*

*Derek Brotherton*

*Marjorie Cloninger*

*Heather Estes*

*Robyn Mundy*

*Lauryn-Ashley Redmond*

*Rachel Turner*

A panel of local celebrity judges, including Yolanda Green, public affairs director at KIAH channel 39; T.J. Callahan, KILT-FM radio personality; and Craig DeSerf of David Taylor Cadillac volunteered to take on the difficult task of narrowing down the top ten finalists, and ultimately naming the 2008 Sugar Land Superstar.

### *The Top Ten*

Whether they happened to come across a Superstar advertisement in Town Square or heard about the contest by word of mouth, the contest finalists could hardly contain their nervous enthusiasm as they prepared for the August 9th finals.

"I'm excited for the opportunity," says finalist Heather Estes before her performance. Concentrating on not tripping in her four-inch heels, Estes was spurred on by the supportive signs her three daughters held in the audience. Family members and close friends are perhaps the biggest motivators for many of the contestants. Marjorie Cloninger's boyfriend encouraged her to participate in the contest. "I'm always singing around the house," says Cloninger, who graduated from Dulles High School. "I've performed in plays and musicals before, but nothing as big as in Town Square. Now I'm glad I ended up going to the auditions."

Last year's 1st runner up contestant Derek Brotherton performed in memory of his mother, who passed away in March. Inspired by more sentimental tunes, Brotherton sang from the heart, and won the crowd over with his sincerity. Veteran performer and 2006 finalist Robyn Mundy was inspired by the Superstar competition location. "I thought it would be cool to sing on the City Hall steps," says Mundy, who spent last summer singing and dancing in an act at Six Flags St. Louis.

Well acquainted with local performance venues, high school students Rachael Turner and Anik Bhattacharya used their experience from singing in plays and choral competitions to their advantage as they rose to the top ten. "I thought it would be a fun thing to do," says Turner, a veteran of area talent competitions. "This has been quite an experience," says Bhattacharya, who was so inspired by Sugar Land Superstar that he is considering auditioning for American Idol. Fellow high school student and finalist Lauren-Ashley Redmond will be well on her way to becoming a superstar in her own right when she debuts her first full scale independent release EP in September.

Renee Miura's rendition of Pat Benatar's Heartbreaker earned her a place in the top three. A graduate of Texas Lutheran University, Miura goal holds a bachelor of music in vocal performance. "I had the whole family dancing in the living room when I would practice," she says of her preparation for the Superstar finals. "I had so much support from my family. They believe in me, and I'm really thankful for that." Currently a full-time property manager, Miura's goal is to record a CD showcasing her original musical compositions.

Although first runner-up Meagan Whitfield competed vocally

in high school at Stephen F. Austin, Whitfield left music for life's other pursuits in recent years. The Superstar competition offered Whitfield the opportunity she needed to return to her performance roots. Naturally shy, Whitfield feels at home on stage. "I feel that's why God put me here," she says. "It's my purpose." Since the competition, Whitfield and her husband, who is also a talented vocalist, are planning to perform together in local venues.

### *The Superstar*

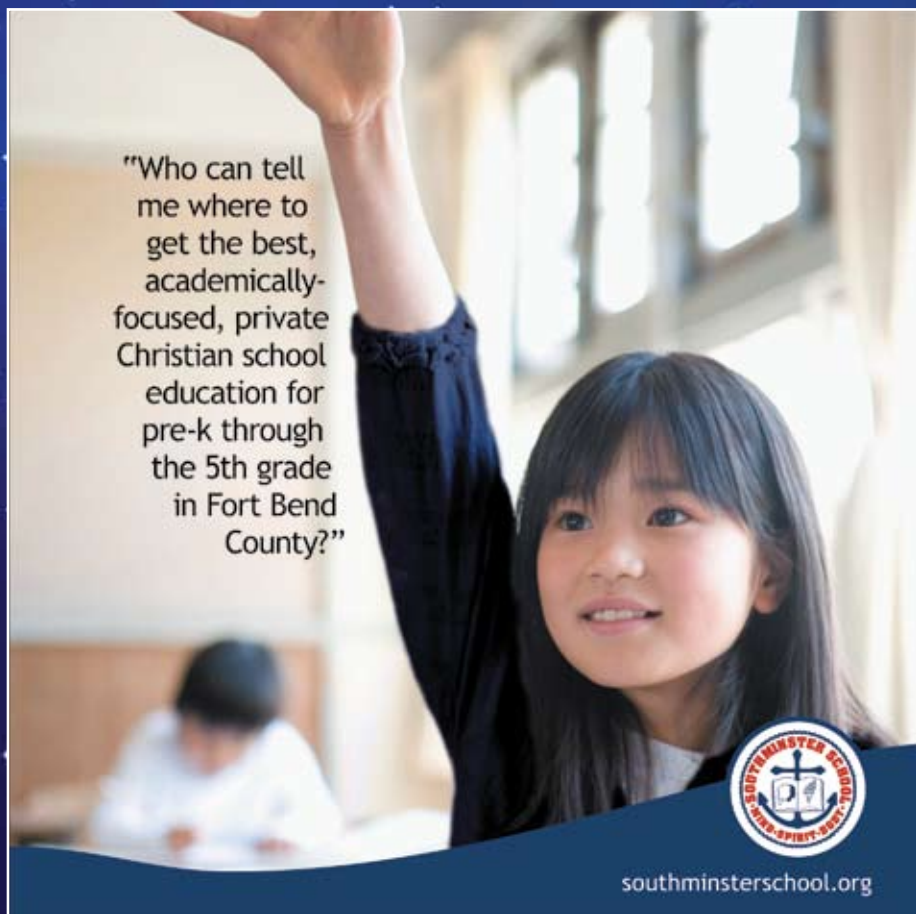
At the end of the evening, it was middle school counselor Melanie Finley who took home the title of Sugar Land Superstar. "Music is just part of my life," says Finley, who writes inspirational and Gospel melodies and serves as worship leader for Greater St. Matthew Church. "Everything I do has to do with helping others feel good about themselves." Finley held on to the same upbeat attitude throughout the Superstar Contest, as evidenced by her performance of Whitney Houston's I Believe in You and Me. "It has been a very positive experience," she says. "Although it was a competition, no one felt like they were competing. Everyone felt like a star." Audience members who enjoyed Finley's performance will be able to see her as Dorothy in a production of The Wiz at The Ensemble Theater downtown next summer. In December, Finley will be back at Town Square to perform at the Christmas tree lighting December 4th.

"On behalf of Sugar Land Town Square, I'd like to congratulate Melanie and all the finalists who performed in the Superstar competition this year. The level of vocal talent in Fort Bend County continues to amaze me and I'm already looking forward to next year's competition," says contest creator Rita Sosebee. **SLM**

*CRYSTAL RAWLS resides in Sugar Land and may not be quite ready for the stage, but she does enjoy life of a writer and marketing specialist.*



*2nd Runner Up Renee Miura,  
Superstar Melanie Finley, and  
1st Runner Up Meagan Whitfield*



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