





# Striking Gold

*K*im Michael Polote doesn't let grass grow under her feet. The singer and mother of three has been busy since her Savannah Onstage American Traditions Competition win in March.

The Oxnard Gold Medalist, the first native Georgian to win the \$10,000 coveted prize in the international arts festival, is full of plans.

Polote discussed her activities one evening at a busy Italian restaurant. She spoke of lunch earlier that day with a Savannah Symphony Orchestra official to discuss ways for the orchestra to become more involved in the schools.

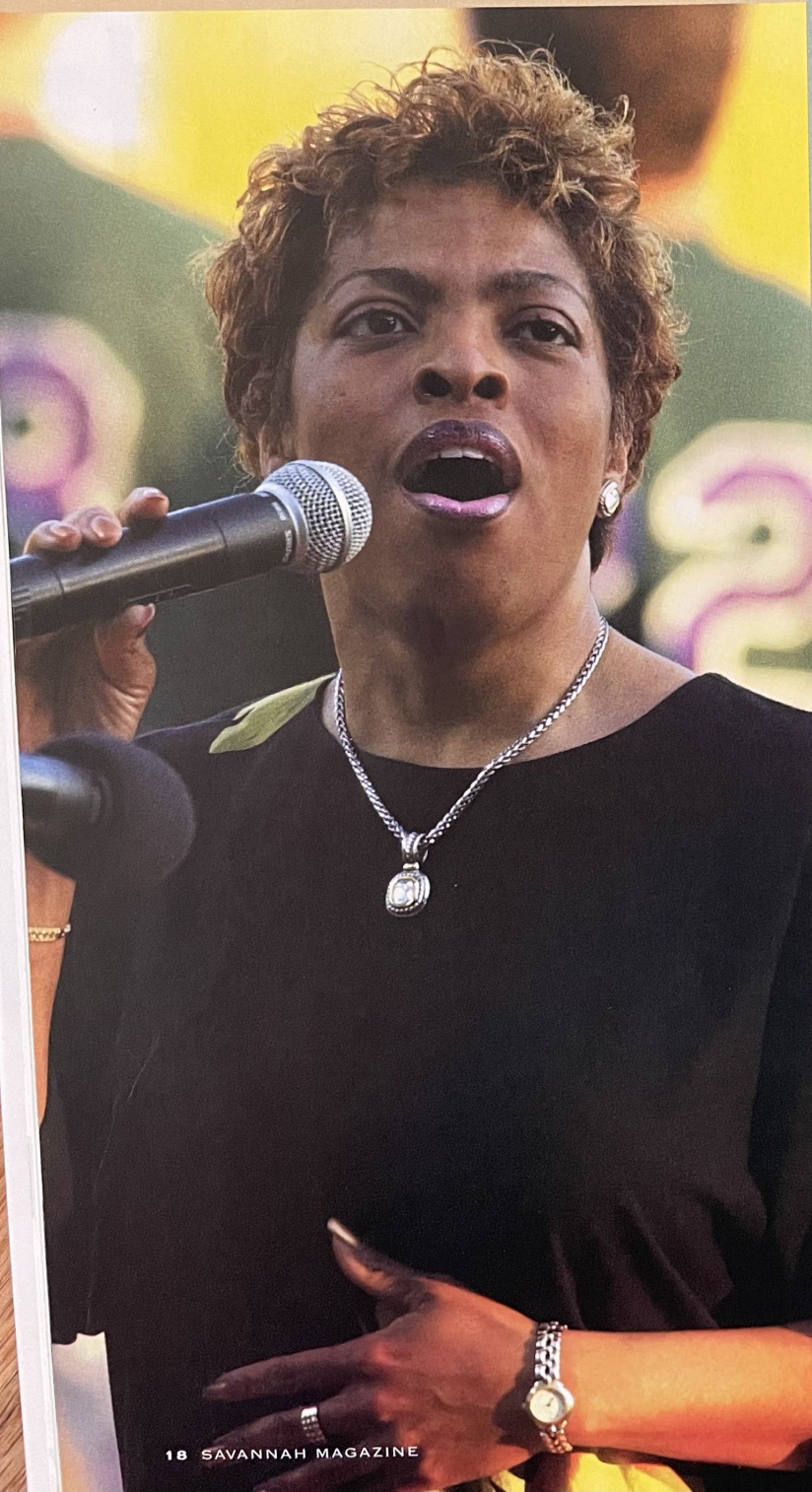
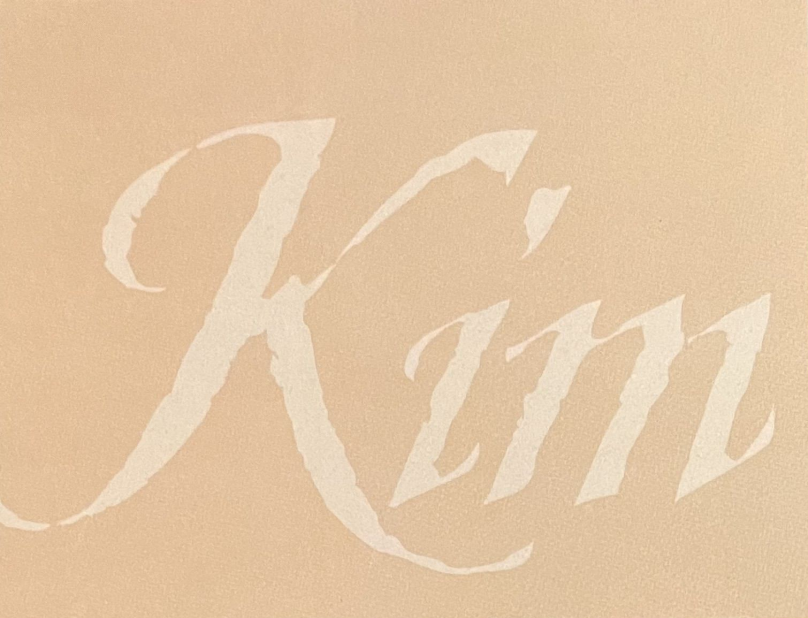
"I want to be a music ambassador. A lot of children communicate through music," Polote said.

She spoke excitedly of her immediate plans to contact Georgia Public Radio about doing voiceovers and her hopes of singing the National Anthem for the Atlanta Braves. (She sang the National Anthem for the Savannah Sand Gnats' season opener in April.)

She talked of singing sometime with the Swingin' Medallions (plans are in the works).

PAUL NURNBERG

BY CINDY BROOME



SAVANNAH MORNING NEWS

- Other aspirations include:
- wanting a singing role in a Disney cartoon
- creating a CD (plans are underway for a September release)
- launching a "Keep Music Alive" foundation for school children
- singing a duet with Harry Belafonte
- and organizing a one-woman show.

Like we said, Kim Michael Polote has big plans. But it's likely some of these projects might never have evolved without the gift — and the magic — of a very special dress.

### The Dress

Polote hadn't planned to enter the 2001 competition. She'd participated in 1999 — advancing to the semifinals — and again in 2000. Dental surgery in December 2000 prompted her to decide to skip this year.

But a friend with a dress changed her mind. This wasn't just any dress. This was a performance gown, Polote said. The elegant dress is black velvet in the front; the back is of a fabric with a gold swirling pattern that cascades down, matching a slightly off-the-shoulder neckline. The gold is flecked with touches of red and silver.

"This gown belongs to the winner of Savannah Onstage," Polote, 43, recalled longtime friend Mercedes Arnold saying. When Arnold and her daughter, Angie Jenkins, gave the dress to Polote in December, she didn't have the heart to tell her friends she didn't plan to enter.

"That was God saying, 'Girl, you'd better get in this competition this year,'" she said. "She'd never bought me a gown before."

The longtime family friends had met in Atlanta for a Christmas celebration.

"I went shopping, and I just saw this dress," Arnold said. "The only thing the dress lacked was Kim in it. I could just see Kim on stage."

When Polote and her family visited, Arnold said, "I said, 'I have a birthday present for you.' (Polote's birthday is in January.) And her mouth just flew open.

"I could just see it. I said, 'You are going to perform this year, and you are going to win. This is your year. I see you in that dress, winning.'"

Her friend's conviction and the dress spurred Polote into action. When she returned from the holiday, she had one day to prepare an audition tape for the Dec. 29 deadline.

The gown was just the beginning. Polote's road to gold was paved with more twists and turns than a rollercoaster.

### Beating the Clock

Polote immediately arranged to record a tape with Sanford Jones as her accompanist. She also needed an 8-by-10-inch photo of a color print, but several places would not make copies, citing concerns about potential copyright violations. Finally, a shop accommodated her request.

"We did the tape in record time and hand-delivered it downtown" to the Savannah Onstage office, she said. Her daughter Melanie, in town from Atlanta, drove her since she was still on medication from the surgery. "When I got there, I think I had nine minutes."

Elizabeth Stewart, Savannah Onstage executive director, remembered that day.

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"These contestants always make us nervous," she said. "We have a hard time remembering they're going to send in their tapes late. At the last minute they all come trucking in. UPS makes many stops."

Since the Onstage staff is not connected to the judging, staff members cheer when someone delivers a tape. There was "general revelry" when Polote delivered her tape.

"It's like when you see people leaping for the meter before the meter maid comes," Stewart said. "That's my impression of her, getting it in before 5 o'clock."

Next Polote had to line up accompanists.

The Sunday before the Tuesday quarterfinals, she sang at Wesley Monumental Methodist Church, where Tim Hall is organist. She asked him to accompany her at the quarterfinals, but he said he couldn't participate in the full event.

She remembered telling him, "Let's just worry about the quarterfinals. The

rest will take care of itself."  
They rehearsed Monday night for two hours.

She hoped that she would need accompanists for the semifinals.

That Sunday the vocalists went for orientation at Trinity United Methodist Church, where she met Johnny Edwards, who was accompanying another vocalist. They exchanged phone numbers.

She was first to sing Tuesday afternoon, with Hall as her accompanist. After the evening round, the 15 semifinalists were announced, and she was one of them.

She called David Duckworth, a musician friend, and said, "You gotta do it, you gotta do it!" Then she called Edwards, needing them both. There was a flurry of activity as Polote scrambled up until the last minute to rehearse with each of them.

A similar time crunch occurred with her performance gowns. "Evelyn James did miracles on those gowns," Polote said of the Pooler seamstress,

who altered all three of her dresses. "I was *sooo* excited. And living on the edge. I knew this was all by divine order, believe me," she said. "I was totally, totally pumped up, and I knew that I'd done my preparation, but I wasn't in control. And then I released it for God to use me."

## Her Singing Roots

Born in Savannah, Polote began singing as a child at St. Anthony's Catholic Church and at St. Vincent's Academy. Today she sings regularly at Resurrection of Our Lord Catholic Church and Unity Church.

As a teen and young adult, she sang at St. Vincent's annual candlelight ceremony and when she sought the Miss Savannah title in 1977. Polote has had no formal voice training and can't read music; she sings by ear.

"I always just wanted to spread a lot of love in music and just give people a message of a lot of good in their life, even if there're bad things in their life," she said. "I believe communicating through music is one of the best forms of communication. It opens so many doors because it is a universal language."

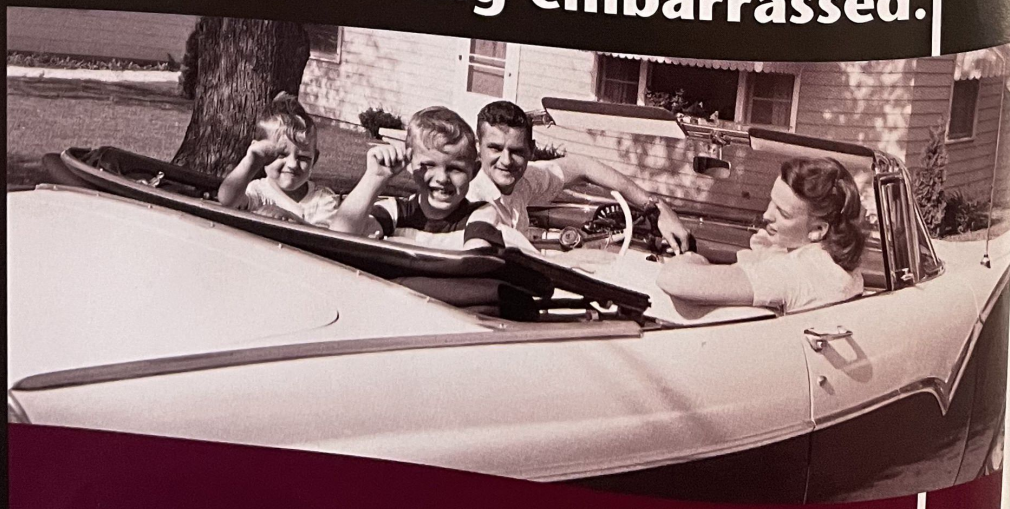
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## Paging Harry Belafonte

"Mr. Belafonte, are you there? Kim Polote wants to do a duet with you next year," she said in the third person. She laughed delightedly when sharing this goal.

"He'd just better get ready. He just doesn't know it yet."

Polote grew up listening to Belafonte. "There was music all the time in that house," she said. "My mother is very musical. We were exposed to a lot of the different types of music."

Why does she want to sing with Belafonte?

"When I was younger, there weren't that many black actors and singers then. He seemed to be a decent person, seemed to be a nice person. The whole family could watch his movies. And my mother has always been a Harry Belafonte fan."

In fact, Polote and Angie Jenkins arranged for their mothers to hear Belafonte when he performed in Savannah a couple of years ago. Polote couldn't attend because she had a prior commitment with her son. Jenkins drove their mothers to the concert, and Polote picked them up afterward.

When she arrived, she looked inside Trustees Theater. The performer was near the front of the stage. A police officer standing in the aisle shook his head at her, warning her away. But this was Harry Belafonte. And he was at floor level — accessible.

"Then he (the officer) kind of looked away and I walked on up there.

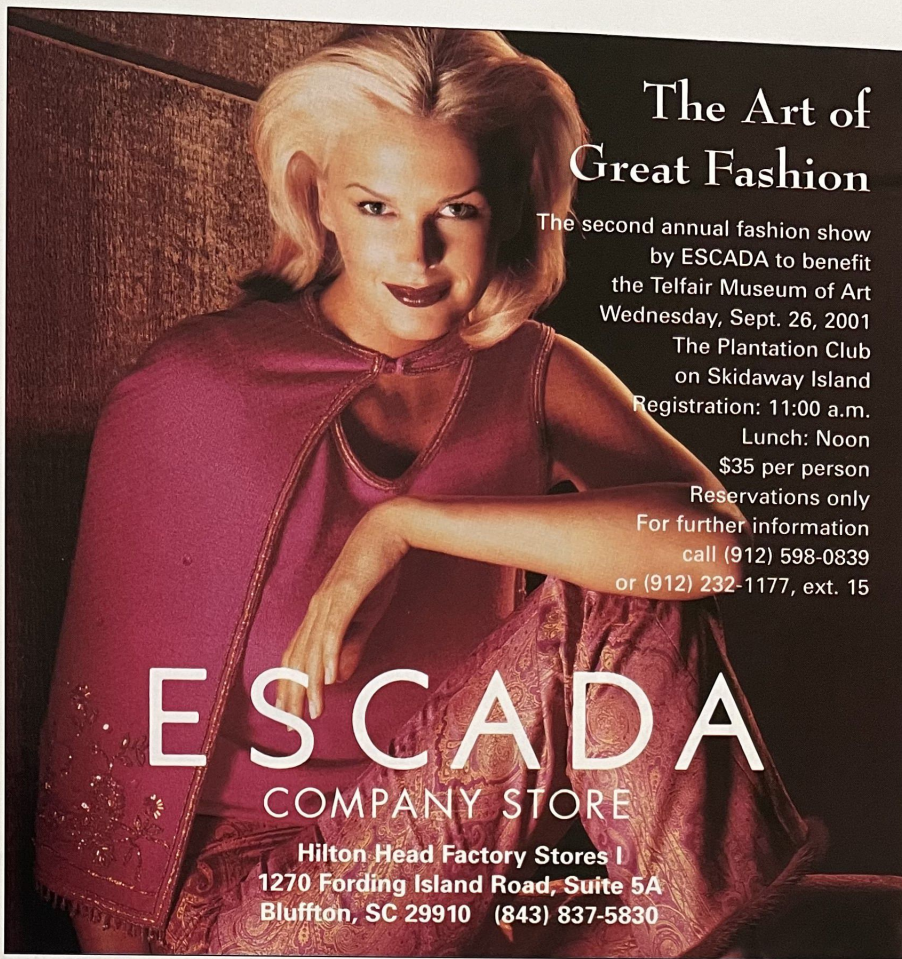
"Instead of asking for permission, I was going to ask for forgiveness," she said with a giggle. She introduced herself to the legendary singer, shook his hand and they chatted.

## At the Office

When Polote is not singing, she's working at Laidlaw Transit, where she is payroll manager. Spring visitors saw signs of Polote's win around the building. Three large pink banners at the entrance read: CONGRATULATIONS KIM 1ST PLACE WINNER SAVANNAH ONSTAGE. At her office, a large blue sign stripped diagonally across the window of the door read: "The Very Best — OUR DIVA."

Polote has been at Laidlaw for three years. Prior to that, she sold insurance for eight years.

On this rainy, spring day, a fierce wind whines through the window.



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But Polote's brightly lighted office is welcoming.

One of two branch managers walked in. She introduced him as "the godfather of transportation, James Brown!"

"We've been proud of her," Brown beamed. "She is a very talented person — and she's a very personable person ... almost too good to be true. We were all very pleased that she won. We thought she should have won the first year. One of our own won, so we were really pleased."

Branch manager Thomas Williams concurred.

"She does not allow what has happened to her to go to her head. She hasn't changed. She hasn't allowed the notoriety to get to her. It was an exciting time for us to have Kim win."

A radio in her office was tuned to a country music station. A photo on her desk shows her children — Kim, Melanie and Richard — smiling widely at the camera. Dozens of family snapshots are in a small photo album on her desk.

Polote discussed how tight-knit the family is.


"We had to find strength in each other," she said, referring to a difficult time in her life. Divorced for 14 years, she's very close to her children and her mother, Dorothy Faye Michael, a woman to whom she gives much credit for her success.

### Life Goes On

Winning the gold medal has affected Polote's life even in small ways.

In traffic, people recognize her. "I was at the red light the other day," she said. "This gentleman two lanes over tooted his horn and called out, 'You won! Congratulations!' I thought, 'This is wild!'"

And at a downtown restaurant, Polote was having lunch one day and a man walked in, spotted her and congratulated her. She thanked him warmly. Her lunch companion thought he was a friend. But she didn't know him. She says such incidents happen frequently.

"I have not really had the chance to slow the pace down yet. It's just so incredible. It's picking up speed. It's definitely opening doors that I knew were there, but they weren't opening as easily as they are now." 



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