

Conversation with

Mandisa

My new perspective

Living with “should have,” “could have,” “would have” moments is not in the DNA of recording artist and author Mandisa Hundley. In fact, the dedication to seeing her dreams become reality took her into the final rounds of American Idol’s fifth season. Affectionately referred to by millions of her fans as just “Mandisa,” the former Idol contestant discussed with Amber Weigand-Buckley, managing editor of On Course magazine in Assemblies of God National Youth Ministries, how reality-show life brought a real-life food addiction to the forefront, the rewards of finding purpose as a woman dedicated to Jesus, and her new book, IDOLeyes: My New Perspective on Faith, Fat and Fame.

tpe: Before doing the fifth season (in 2005-06) of *American Idol* you had already been singing backup for a lot of big names like Shania Twain and Trisha Yearwood, plus touring with Beth Moore. What attracted you to doing *Idol*?

MANDISA: I think it’s the best show in the world. I believe anybody who is a singer and watches *American Idol* thinks, *I wonder what would happen if?* ... I didn’t ever want to wonder what my life would have been if I had never done it.

Mandisa Faith, Fat & Fame

“Overcoming this addiction is a moment-by-moment, situation-by-situation victory. Every time I overcome it, I’m stronger the next time.”

tpe: You’ve been on a whirlwind media tour with the book as well as the new album. Now that you’ve tasted what it’s like to be in the limelight, is it all it is cracked up to be?

MANDISA: Besides [satisfying] the “I wonder what would happen?” curiosity, the other thing I want to know at the end of my life is that it had meaning. Of course, the loss of anonymity is not all it’s cracked up to be, and fame is not necessarily what I was in it for. Purpose is what I was in it for. I can say I’ve got that. So in the long run, it was worth it.

tpe: In your book, you discuss a lot about your journey, focusing on self-esteem and what beauty is, and you’re very open about talking about your food addiction. How did your food addiction start?

MANDISA: My parents divorced. I was 10 years old when my dad and stepmother moved away. I was really active before that. [My addiction]

started in junior high and kind of snowballed in high school. I was hanging out with a pretty risqué group. I remember my friend Kim had me try one of her cigarettes and I hated it. I vowed never to do it again and went home.

My throat was hurting so much from smoking I poured a big glass of orange juice. Then something in me said, “If I’m drinking orange juice, I might as well have some pancakes.” I started cooking pancakes and ate so many of them.

Kim’s vice was cigarettes, and mine was food. I felt comforted when I would watch TV and eat. That’s how I poured my heart out — stuffing myself with food.

tpe: Would you have been so open and vulnerable about this issue if it hadn’t been something *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell picked on and placed in the forefront?

MANDISA: It was a blessing in disguise. I want to live my life with purpose. If [Simon] had not said anything, I don’t feel

I would have been as open. It has given me the opportunity to speak about it. Also, I wouldn’t have made it as far on the show if he hadn’t said it. Those comments endeared me to a lot of people and the worst situation turned into the best situation. Being able to tell him I forgave him because Jesus forgave me was probably the most powerful thing I’ve ever done. I felt like redemption was being modeled.

tpe: Sometimes as Christians, when we get stressed out, the first thing we turn to may not be prayer. A lot of us look to food. Why do you think that is?

MANDISA: It’s kind of accepted. We call things “comfort foods,” and we shouldn’t. We are such a weight-driven society. But on the other hand, we see commercials about “family food and fun” and how you can super-size it. You’ll never hear commercials about how alcohol or cigarettes satisfy. But [as Christians] it is OK to hear food satisfies.

tpe: How do you go from dealing with the food addiction to finding comfort in your own skin no matter what size you are?

MANDISA: It has taken years and it is still something I struggle with. But I started turning to food before I came to know the Lord. I feel strongly about talking to young people and being honest with young girls about what really satisfies us. It’s not our friends. It’s not being cool or trying to do the cool things to fit in. Only the Lord satisfies us. If young people grow up knowing that, they won’t have the same propensity to turn to anything but Him for validation.

[Overcoming this addiction] is a moment-by-moment, situation-by-situation victory. Every time I overcome it, I’m stronger the next time. Because I’m struggling with it, I want to help other people not struggle with it.

tpe: Can you recall a moment, maybe from the *Idol* season, when you really felt God moving in a personal relationship?

MANDISA: The culmination was when I was eliminated. Once we’d made the top 12 we had something called the “Kiss-Off” dinner every time someone was eliminated. At that dinner, contestants and some of the *American Idol* staff would toast or sometimes roast the eliminated contestant. I’ll never forget the things said to me.

There was a hodgepodge of contestants — some were believers, some weren’t, and some said they were but you really couldn’t tell by the way they lived. But as each person stood, most of them in tears, they told me I was



the godliest person they had ever known and knew I was praying for them. They appreciated me being there and said I was the standard of righteousness.

That let me know I was on the show for so much more than to sing songs. I was there to be a light to people who may never step in a church.

tpe: Tell me one piece of advice you received on the set of *Idol* you wish you would have known when you started out in the music business or back when you were pursuing your degree.

MANDISA: It’s not really one piece of advice I received, but one I realize now. Be true to yourself even in the face of people wanting you to compromise or be somebody other than who you are. At the end of the day, if you pretend to be somebody other than who you are, you’re going to be miserable. Thankfully, I didn’t fall into that trap.

The world is going to decide who you are based on what you’re portraying. You want others to know who you are so they won’t be surprised when you live your life the way you’re called to live it. **tpe**

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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