

A Family Portrait

David Pittman



When 28-year-old Dave Pittman of Arkansas appeared on “American Idol” singing the Sam Cooke ballad “Bring it On Home to Me” people across the country heard him sing as well as talk about having Tourette Syndrome. Although he didn’t make it into the finals, his appearance on the show and the YouTube videos that went viral around the world, spread awareness of TS far and wide.

Many of the *Inside TSA* readers are familiar with you from “American Idol,” but others will need an introduction. How did you come to audition for the show and what happened?

I’d always wanted to audition for the show, but life got in the way. I was in school or something else was going on in my life. I believe everything happens in God’s timing — just one of those things and it was the right time. I’d finished school, staying near Liberty University in Virginia after I graduated.

I was seeking something and landed a couple of jobs, but not what I was looking for. By December of 2008, I made the decision to come back to Arkansas and try out for a show in Branson, Missouri. During the summer I had that ‘now or never’ feeling that I’d regret it if I didn’t go and try out. Ultimately that’s what led me to it.

It’s always been a dream of mine to be a performer. I don’t think I fit in anywhere else — just on stage, singing and performing. I had my foot in several doors, doing different things: construction, sales and janitorial work. I did that on purpose, jumping around and having different experiences. But at the same time I wasn’t happy doing all of that. What I love and desire is music.

How have things changed for you since you were seen by so many TV viewers?

Oh man, 30 million people watch the show. Things have changed dramatically. There are so many different venues, events and opportunities, out in Hollywood, some local and some not. I’m obviously excited about the big performing events and the exposure that is coming up, but there’s also speaking engagements, media interviews with a lot of new magazines and newspapers — Fox TV in Fayetteville, Arkansas and Springfield, Missouri and the TSA conference, too.

I’m also laying down a demo now. I’ve got one but it’s so old now I’m doing a new one. If nothing happens from the exposure recording contract-wise, I’ll go back and try “American Idol” again. The producers want me back and I fall into

the eligible age gap as I’ll still be 28 in November when they come around again.

Does TS have an impact on your performance as a singer?

No. It’s not apparent when I’m singing. I don’t believe it’s affected me as a singer. I really think you’re using a different part of your brain. Performing, playing basketball, if you’re focused on what you’re doing, it is as if your brain blocks out the tics. That’s what singing and performing does for me.

When I sleep it doesn’t affect me. A lot of other people with TS say they can’t sleep because of it. It must be very frustrating, fortunately not me. I need my sleep.

What was your life like when you were growing up with TS?

It was really hard growing up with TS especially in the early years. We started noticing symptoms when I was in second grade. I was dealing with something I knew I couldn’t help and my parents would reprimand me. They thought it was a habit and they thought they could break the ‘habit.’ But there was nothing I could do.

Finally my mom — it usually is the mothers who do the research and find out what’s going on — heard about TS from a friend. We had this huge encyclopedia in our house and when I was about nine she looked it up. She said, ‘That’s Dave.’ They took me to see a neurologist after that. Understanding TS, trying to find a doctor, going through different medications that were changing my body, giving me headaches... it was all very hard for a nine-year-old kid to deal with.

Knowing what it was — just being diagnosed is a relaxer, a relief, but there’s also this realization that you’ve got this thing, this disorder. Not only that, but going to school and trying to focus with TS behind the scenes.

How was school for you?

Kids can be cruel. I honestly had a hard time with it. Kids made fun of me, called me names, mocked my tics. It got very bad. Fourth grade was the hardest year in my life, everything

happened. I remember school let out for summer and so I was glad to be out of school. The whole summer was great I remember it like it was yesterday.

And then one day when there was about two weeks left of summer vacation we were sitting down at the dinner table — my parents, my older sister, my younger brother and me — and my mom said there were only two weeks left before we would go back to school. My mother remembers the look on my face. I was horrified.

I told her there was no way I could go back. I couldn’t go back and face those kids and focus on school. Of course she said I had to go back. You have to when you’re a 9-year-old kid.

We hunt and fish, so my father has guns in the house. I started asking him about squirrel hunting and he said the season was later and he’d let me know when. I asked him where the guns were and he asked why I wanted to know. I told him it was because I wanted to get ready for the season. He kind of dropped the subject and my parents went out to the store for a little while.

I was thinking that there is no way I could go back to school. I wrote a note to my parents telling them I loved them and that I’d miss them. I drew a frownie face on the note. I was crying and I went into my parent’s room, locked the door and took out the gun. My brother and sister were outside the door asking why I’d locked it. I heard my parents coming into the house. I think I was a second or so from pulling the trigger, but I knew I couldn’t go through with it. I put the gun down and unlocked the door. That was the lowest point of my life.

The following years I was homeschooled by my parents, rightfully so. My mom pushed me to accept TS. Through that year I became more comfortable. With the help, love and support of my family, I got through it.

Homeschooling wasn’t really for me. I went back to public school in 6th grade. My mom educated the teachers about TS and we had a big meeting

with all my classmates. My mom educated the entire school!

After that I was able to fully accept that I had TS and be comfortable. As soon as I wasn’t worried about what they said about me, was the moment they accepted me. I wasn’t the ‘TS Guy’ I was Dave. That outlook on life had brought me through the toughest times in my life.

I used to think of TS as a curse. Now I think of it as a blessing. It has made me a stronger person — it has made me who I am. I tell everybody that.

An old friend is the librarian at the elementary school. There were a couple of kids there, 4th graders just like I’d been, with TS who were having a hard time with it. I was asked to come and speak to the whole 4th grade class about TS and about making fun of people. What an opportunity! I went back to where it all started and walked those same halls — the flood of memories from 19 years before. I talked to the two guys with TS and their classmates. It meant so much to me. It was a really rewarding opportunity.

There are many aspiring musicians in the TSA family, any advice?

If you have a dream, go for it. Don’t be afraid to take risks. If you want to be something in life you have to learn to take risks and go outside your comfort zone. Take risks and go for your dream.

Do you have any advice for the parents of kids with TS?

I know TS can be very embarrassing, but never say “stop doing that, you’re getting on my nerves.” It’s very hurtful. Words can be very hurtful. Be patient. Patience is a big deal. But also let your kid be his own person.

My mother took it upon herself to fight my battles, I’m grateful but as your child gets older, you have to cut him off and let him fight his own battles or you wind up hurting as him as a young adult. Know when to step back as a parent. ■