

“IDOL” dreams



Tracy Moore's
song of hope
and discovery

By Michelle Roberts

Tracy Moore, hair dyed electric blue, strides confidently into a conference room at Los Angeles' Renaissance Hollywood Hotel and faces down the toughest talent scout in the entertainment industry—*American Idol*'s Simon Cowell.

As the striking young woman in funky cargo pants prepares to belt out the song she has traveled nearly 1,000 miles to perform, Cowell blurts out a question: “What do you want to do with your life?”

Moore, who has just beaten more than 10,000 other pop-star hopefuls for a chance to audition for the show's celebrity judges, doesn't miss a beat.

“I want to start a support foundation for people with schizophrenia,” she says, flashing a sincere, ear-to-ear smile.

Cowell, famous for his scathing critiques that frequently reduce *American*

Idol contestants to tears, is momentarily stunned.

“Simon just blinked and said, ‘What?’” Moore recalls, mimicking Cowell's British accent. “He expected me to say, ‘I want to be a superstar.’ I told him, ‘I have schizophrenia. And I want to help others who have it, too.’”

“It was the first time I've ever seen him speechless,” she says.

Since her first *American Idol* experience, 24-year-old Moore has learned that, like fame, the road to recovery from a major mental illness is full of twists, turns, and detours.

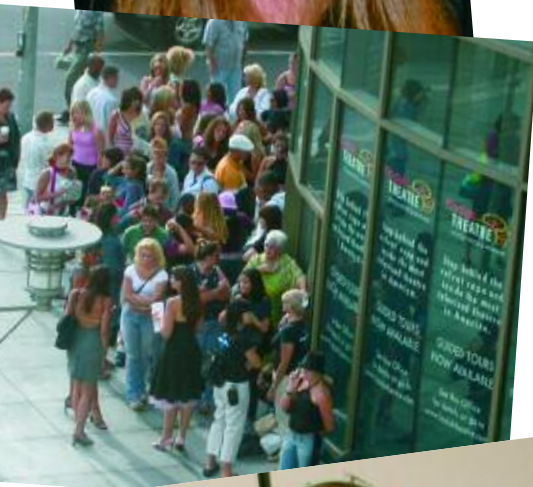
Moore, diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 21, sometimes thinks the TV talks to her or that she will be the next pope. But one idea remains crystal clear. Like so many things in life, Moore understands that it's the trying, not always the winning, that counts.

“My gift is a beautiful voice,” says Moore. “And I also have an illness that means I'll have to work 10 times harder than most people to get it recognized.”

“I know that might not ever happen,” she says. “But the only thing I couldn't live with is if I didn't try.”

Budding talent

Moore discovered the power of her voice while performing in musicals at Wilson High School in Portland, Oregon. She was a doll in *Gays and Dolls* and Ronette in *Little Shop of*



From the top: blond and sultry Tracy before the blue dye; the *Idol* tryout line streams out of the Renaissance Hollywood Hotel; Tracy gets a hug from “Mr. Cool,” an *Idol* show staffer who gives pep talks to contestants before they perform for the judges.

Opposite page: Being a tourist in Hollywood



Horrors, entertaining with confident grace and a rich, smoky voice that some have compared to that of Melissa Etheridge.

Despite her gregarious personality and seeming confidence on stage, Moore says she can now see things about herself during those years that hinted at what was to come: the budding signs of schizophrenia.

“I’d always get this weird, terrifying feeling on stage that everyone was going to just walk off and leave me standing there,” she says.

Once started, Moore’s paranoia grew quickly, like wisteria that envelops a sun porch before the end of spring. At her high school graduation ceremony in June 2000, Moore recalls being so self-conscious that she couldn’t walk across the stage to get her diploma, crouching behind students who’d already collected theirs.

“My parents were so mad at me,” she later recalls. “But I just couldn’t go up there.”

Moore’s parents, computer network engineers Pam and Don Moore, knew their

daughter was troubled. They took her to see a psychologist who, after four days of tests, determined Tracy was “depressed.”

Pam Moore was unconvinced. The symptoms her daughter was having—paranoia, disorganized speech, fears about irrational things—seemed to go well beyond teenage depression. And the antidepressants a doctor prescribed for Tracy didn’t seem to help at all.

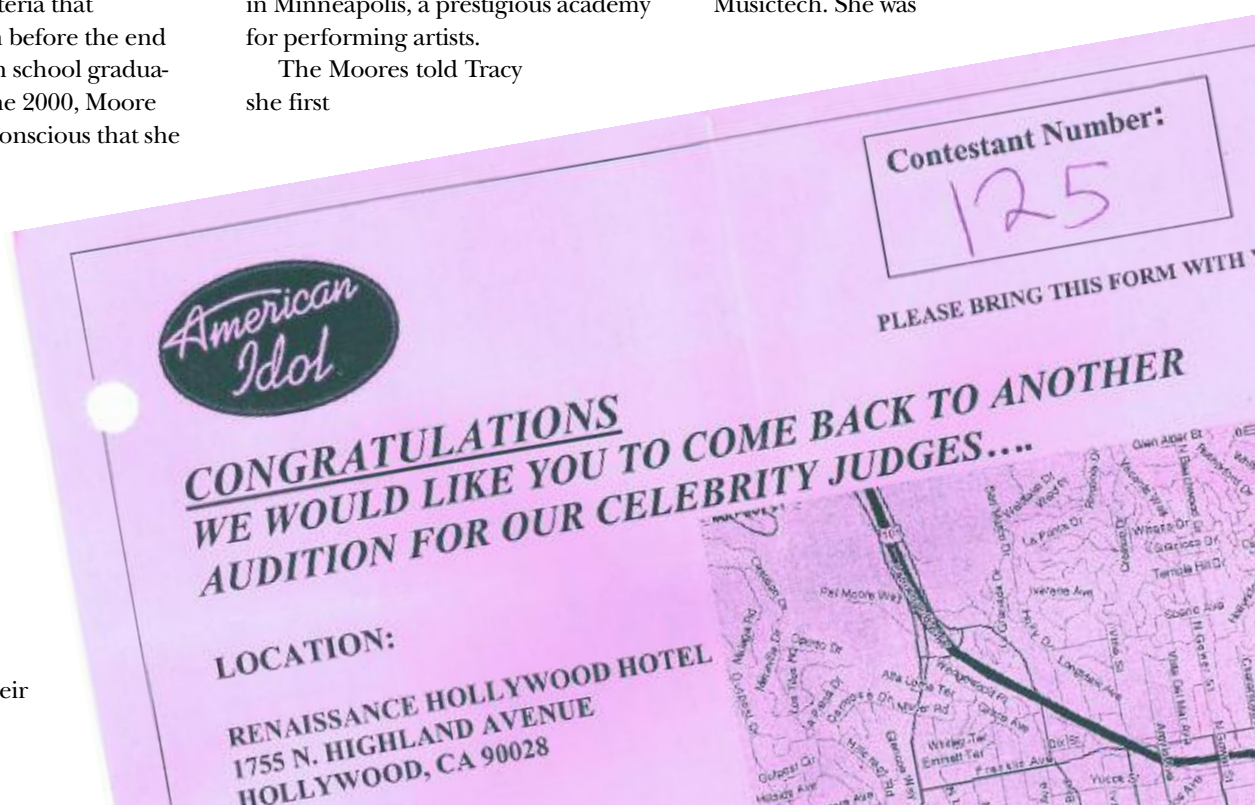
The Moores were reluctant to allow Tracy to leave for college, despite her dream of attending Musictech College in Minneapolis, a prestigious academy for performing artists.

The Moores told Tracy she first

would have to prove that she could handle college close to home. “So she did,” remembers Don Moore. “She got really good grades.”

Tracy, who had scored surprisingly high on her college entrance exams, sailed through senior-level courses, including those in hydrology and anthropology, at Western Oregon University. Focused only on getting to Musictech, she had chosen the courses randomly.

In May 2001, sticking to their promise, the Moores took Tracy to Minnesota and she enrolled at Musictech. She was



accepted into the school's vocal performance track and quickly fell in love with her classes—pitch, musical notation, and music theory. Tracy's favorite part of the day was when she got to perform in front of a live band. "We were onstage a lot," Tracy says, "and a lot of people thought I was one of the best singers there."

The cracks that would eventually swallow her started small, Tracy remembers. She lost her keys. Then she lost her job.

"I'd wear the same outfit for a week," she says. "I'd forget to shower. I'd get really mad at people I thought were being mean to me and [I'd] yell at them."

Before long, Moore had free-fallen into a world of delusions.

Once, she spent an entire day walking in a circle, convinced that was the

only way to stop aliens from entering her body. Neighbors could hear her in her apartment, shouting at people who weren't there. She wore sandals in the snow.

Moore said her classmates were wary of her. Friends started to pull away. Her roommates moved out.

"They didn't want to be my friend, but they were civil," she says. "They still wanted me to sing in their bands."

During her third term at Musictech, Moore said she called home and

asked her mother to sit down. I told her, "Mom, I'm crazy."

But even that insight quickly disappeared. As her symptoms worsened, Tracy lost her awareness of the illness. "After a while, I didn't know I was ill," she says. "You couldn't convince me that Earth wasn't being threatened by aliens."

After a hospitalization in

"Not good enough," she remembers Cowell calling after her. "But you can sing."

Minnesota, Pam and Don Moore moved their daughter home to Portland, where a psychiatrist diagnosed her with schizophrenia.

The woman who once dreamed of seeing her name in lights now had to struggle to hold down minimum-wage jobs.

But Tracy was afraid she'd lost not only her mind, but her future, too. "I was really scared," she says, "of what was going to become of me."

Into the spotlight

During the summer of 2002, after a few months on a new medication, Moore began to believe it wasn't unreasonable to dream, once again, of a music career.

In order to boost her confidence, Moore decided to "put myself out there." She talked a friend into driving her 16 hours to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, where she waited in line for three days for a chance to audition for *American Idol*.

Moore's waist-length hair, dyed electric blue for the occasion, helped her stand out from the throng of auditioners lined up outside the stadium.

On August 1, 2003, Moore's 22nd birthday, she was selected from the crowd to sing on *Good Morning America*. Later that day, Moore made the first cut when just 250 contestants—out of the original 10,000 who showed up at the Los Angeles tryouts—were selected to go on to the next round.

A few days later, Moore belted out Melissa Etheridge's song "I'm the Only One," for six Fox producers responsible for paring the list of finalists down to 50. Moore said it felt as though her heart would leap from her chest as the judges cast their votes. It was a unanimous "Yes."

A month later, Moore found herself in front of a gaggle of television cameras and face to face with Cowell and fellow judge Randy Jackson, a Grammy Award-winning producer. After throwing Cowell off guard by



telling him she suffered from schizophrenia, Moore launched into her song. Cowell and Jackson let Moore sing most of the song before Cowell signaled her to stop.

“Not good enough,” she remembers him saying dismissively.

Jackson wasn't so sure, “He said, ‘Um, Um. Uh. I don't know. I think I'm going to say no,’” Moore recalls.

The third celebrity judge, 1980s pop star Paula Abdul, wasn't present because she was ill.

Moore says she politely thanked the judges and turned to walk out.

“Not good enough,” she remembers Cowell calling after her. “But you can sing.”

Supporting roles

When Tracy returned home from the *American Idol* audition in 2003, she vowed to practice her singing until the 2004 *Idol* tryouts. Her 15 minutes of fame parlayed into several local performances for mental health fundraisers and other activities. Tracy also started to take community college classes to become a mental health and addictions counselor—a step on her way to developing a support network for others with her illness.

Soon, however, Tracy fell into a common trap. With the voices down to a nearly inaudible whisper, she decided it wouldn't hurt if she stopped taking her medications. Before her parents understood why her behavior had again changed so drastically, Tracy already had slipped away back into a world where she thought the Central Intelligence Agency was monitoring her.

“I was deluded,” she says. “Off medications, I refused to get back on because I was convinced I was being poisoned.”

When Tracy agreed to start back on her medication, the formula that had worked so well for her in the past barely dented the psychosis.

Instead, her psychiatrist prescribed a much more potent drug that not

only required Tracy to receive twice-monthly blood tests, but also made her drool and saddled her with relentless nausea.

Tracy missed the 2004 tryouts for *American Idol* as she was hospitalized in the summer with another relapse.

“I notice that every time she gets sick,” says Pam Moore, “it's a little harder for her to come back.”

With the help of her family, Tracy has made substantial progress in the past year and a half. Although she still hears the occasional voice and continues to deal with false beliefs, she is well enough to live in her own rental house and has recently returned to singing and songwriting.

Her family also has thrown themselves into being her support system. Pam Moore is studying to become a mental health nurse. Don Moore is the new president of the Multnomah County chapter of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) in Portland. Tracy's younger sister, Hilary, a college freshman, participated in a genetic study looking into why some siblings develop schizophrenia and others don't.

“As a family, we're learning how to cope with the realities of this illness and adjusting to how we deal with things,” says Don Moore. “I used to get so angry—sometimes I still do because I'm human—but I've begun to really appreciate the brilliance Tracy has in some music she's done. I just sit there and think, ‘Wow. To have the thoughts and voices in her head and to still be able to do that is pretty remarkable.’”

Each night, Pam Moore calls Tracy to remind her to take her medications. On Tuesday nights, Don and Tracy participate in a Portland theater



Pam and Don Moore moved their daughter back home to Portland, where she was diagnosed.

group for people with mental illnesses. They both have roles in *Harvey*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play about a mild-mannered, pleasant man, who just happens (he says) to have an invisible friend resembling a six-foot rabbit. The family also has purchased studio time for Tracy to record some of her new songs.

“It is a chronic illness,” Pam Moore says. “It never truly goes away, but you can take medicines to treat it just like you can diabetes. There's a whole bunch of picking up, letting go, picking up, letting go. We still have high hopes that Tracy can live a normal life.”

The song goes on

In August 2005, Don Moore drove his daughter to San Francisco where they waited for three days so Tracy could try out. This time, Tracy was screened out before she got before the celebrity judges.

The rejection stung. But Moore, who is hoping to sell some of the songs she's written, says she is learning how to bring herself back to the positive.

What she chooses to remember most about her five minutes in front of Simon Cowell isn't that he said no, but that he said she could sing! **SZ**

Michelle Roberts is a freelance writer based in Portland, Oregon. Roberts, who specializes in writing about mental health and family issues, was a 2005 Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Fellow.