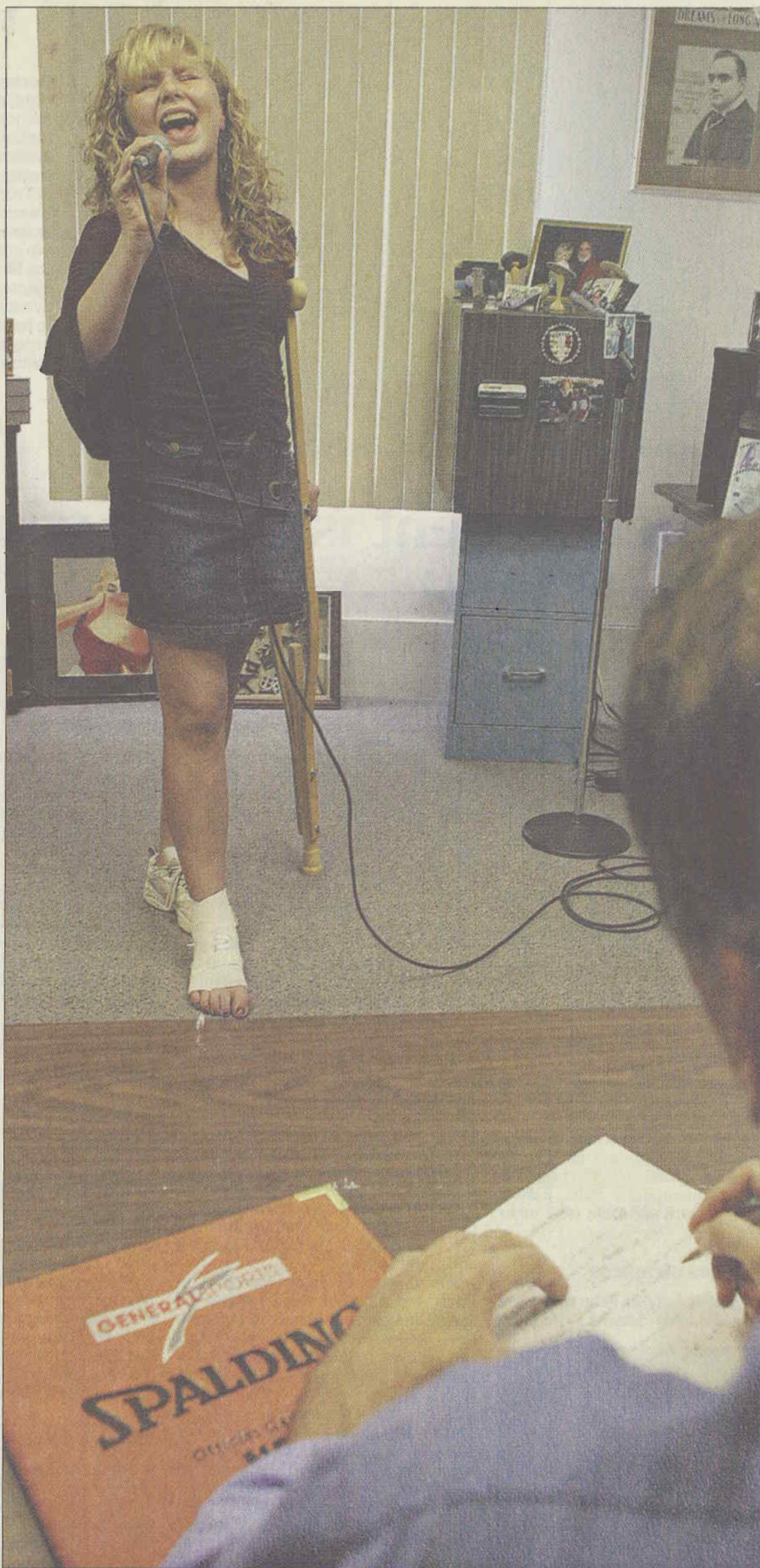


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Life

SECTION B



A chance to shine

Local performers come up big in private 'Star Search' auditions

By VINCENT JACKSON
Staff Writer, (609) 272-7202

Linwood vocal coach Sal Dupree's students may dominate next year's nationally televised "Star Search" talent competition.

Two producers from the CBS-TV series came to audition 70 of day session last week at the Dupree Performing Arts Studio in the Central Square Shopping Plaza, Route 9. Dupree's students were given the courtesy of private auditions because he is the coach of Tiffany Evans of Egg Harbor City, the show's junior grand champion. Another 10 other Dupree vocal students competed on national talent shows this year.

Twenty of the singers who received the private tryout went to a second audition in New York on Sunday.

Caitlyn O'Connell of Smithville was one of them. O'Connell is already a Dupree veteran at age 13. She has been studying with him for more than half her life, since she was six. She tried out for "Star Search" twice before, but didn't hesitate when Dupree offered her a third opportunity last week.

"I couldn't wait to get my chance," O'Connell said.

O'Connell, a Galloway Township middle school eighth grader, had practiced using her whole body to deliver the Frank Sinatra classic

"New York, New York." But she hurt her foot at a dance class two days before the audition and had to limit her expressiveness to her face and voice.

"Usually, I'm quite nervous ... but, it was Sal's studio. It's my second home," O'Connell said. "I did

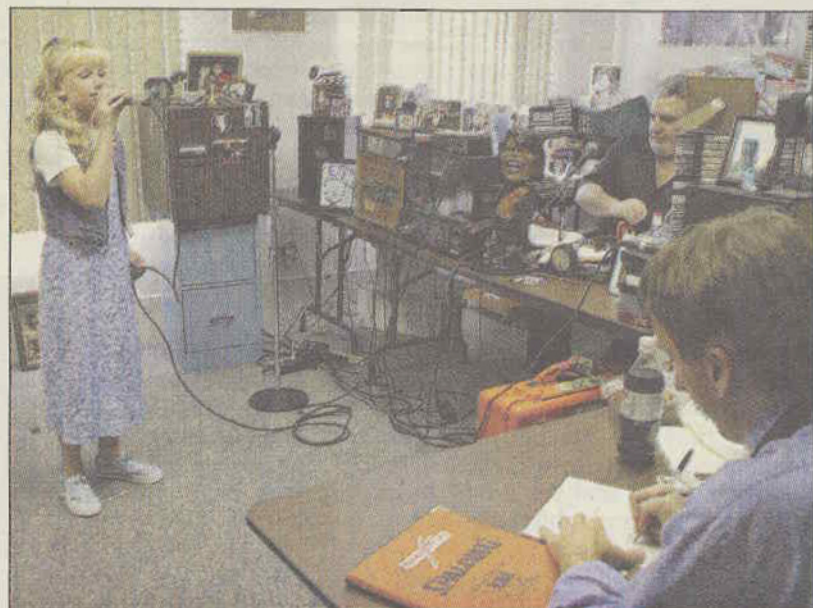
O'Connell performed well enough to participate in the New York auditions. Her mother drove her, former "American Idol" competitor Louis Gazzara, 18, of Folsom, Atlantic County, and Robin Kreiser, 23, of Pensacola, Fla. to the auditions.

"My priest blessed my throat the day before I went to New York," O'Connell said. "I have got to hope for the best. It's in God's hands."

O'Connell auditioned twice Sunday at the Park Central Hotel on 55th Street — this time without the crutches. While in New York, she ran into Britney Lopez and Johnny Scalera, both 14, of Galloway Township, students at Dance Forum on Route 9 in Galloway Township, who also auditioned for "Star Search."

Nissa Zigarelli drove two and half hours from Hawthorne, Passaic County to study with Dupree. She has been studying with him since she was 12, but because of the distance and her

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Caitlyn O'Connell auditioned twice Sunday in New York for 'Star Search.' The 13-year-old Smithville resident has been studying with vocal coach Sal Dupree for more than half her life.

Press photos by Andrew Reilly

Casey Schuber's rendition of 'Blue' was good enough to get her a spot in the New York auditions. Dupree, right, sat in on the Toms River resident's tryout Wednesday in his Linwood studio.