

The Big Voice 2008 Grand Final

10 March 2008

James Bernard is crowned The BIG Voice 2008

James Bernard, a 19-year-old music student from Borehamwood, was last night awarded the title of **The BIG Voice 2008** after winning the Grand Final of the singing contest organised by **YN** (Young Norwood). James fought off strong competition from six other talented young singers, in particular 31-year-old journalist **Karen Lester**, from North London, who was the runner up. The event was once again hosted by radio DJ David Prever, and the top notch judging panel featured X-Factor star and West End sensation Brenda Edwards, music impresario Jonathan Shalit and artist manager Severine Berman. The event, in association with the **Jewish News and Media Group**, was held at the Pentland Theatre in North Finchley's artsdepot. **Around 300 people attended**, helping to **raise £10,000 for Norwood**, a leading UK charity supporting children and families living with disability or coping with social difficulties.

The judges found it particularly hard to choose a winner and made a point of praising Karen's "mesmerizing" voice. However, they chose James for his overall package of singing ability, look and stage presence. His confident, mature renditions of Sinatra's 'New York, New York' and Elton John's 'Sorry seems to be the hardest word' prompted Jonathan Shalit to predict a bright future for him on the West End stage. His prize will be to spend a day in the professional studio of legendary rock star Bryan Ferry.

View video footage from the night, below ...

A naturally delighted **James** said: "What a fantastic feeling. To come first out of so many talented singers is incredible. And to help raise money for a cause as special as Norwood makes it even better."

Brenda Edwards added: "This is the second year that I have supported Norwood. When I judged at the first BIG Voice in 2006 I was really impressed, but tonight was an even higher standard. James is an entertainer and deserved to win." **Jonathan Shalit** said: "It was a tough choice but the right person won in the end. I am also very happy to support Norwood. I have met so many families who have been touched by Norwood's work in one way or another – what they do is fantastic." **David Prever** said: "There were some excellent performances tonight and it has been a pleasure to support Norwood once again. I was very moved by the appeal film that was shown and thought it illustrated perfectly the vital work with children and families carried out by this fantastic organisation."

The singers were backed once again by the fabulous **Soul Agents**, led by Tony Abrahams and Paul Stone. They donated countless hours of their time in the weeks leading up to the show, rehearsing with the singers and arranging the songs. Each of the seven singers performed two numbers before the two finalists were selected. Those who didn't make it to the last two were Francia Chengula, 32, Ben Gabay, 25, Sonia Levy, 27, Jessica Taylor, 25 and Sophie Webber, 23. The judges were unanimous in their view that the general standard of competition had been exceptionally high. A particular highlight was **Francia Chengula's** performance of Tina Turner's 'Simply the Best'. Francia, who spent many years as a Support Worker for Norwood, dedicated some of the lyrics to Norwood's staff and service users: "Norwood's staff, you are simply the best. The services you provide are simply the best! The residents are simply the best!"

Although he didn't win, it was certainly a night to remember for **Ben Gabay**, whose on stage proposal to girlfriend Danielle Sarner was met with a positive response – to the obvious delight of everyone present. Ben said: "I had a great evening supporting a wonderful cause, and to cap it all off with my engagement was perfect."

Alisa Fleishman, YN Fundraiser, who organised the event, said: "Our congratulations go deservedly to James who performed so well. It was a thoroughly entertaining night and I would like to thank David Prever, our judges, all our contestants, The Jewish News and Media Group and everyone involved with putting on this event. The fantastic sum of £10,000 raised will go towards supporting vulnerable children and families in our community."

For more information please contact the Public Relations Manager at Norwood on 020 8420 6900 or email pressoffice@norwood.org.uk



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