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Singer spreads warmth and faith

Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX)-February 4, 2011

Readability: 11-12 grade level (Lexile: 1220L)

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*At Mission Arlington, Idol winner Jordin Sparks says her faith is a big part of her life.

ARLINGTON - Popular singer Jordin Sparks brought a message of hope to children at Mission Arlington on Thursday that not even icy roads could stop.

It turns out that the nonprofit agency - Executive Director Tillie Burgin in particular - also warmed her own heart.

"These people are putting in 15 to 16 hours a day giving stuff for free to people who need it," said the charismatic Sparks, who won American Idol in 2007 and is the youngest person to do so. "They're an inspiration for me."

Her visit was part of the fourth annual Jordin Sparks Experience, held each year in the Super Bowl host city before the game. The event included a picnic and a black-tie gala this week to raise money for charitable causes through the "I'm MAD. Are You?" campaign.

On Thursday, Sparks and a group including her brother, P.J., and her mother, Jodi, toured Mission Arlington with Burgin as their guide. Then they went into a room crammed with scores of children and parents from Mission Arlington apartment churches.

Sparks, the daughter of former NFL player Phillippi Sparks, who played with the Cowboys in 2000, treated them to an a cappella version of her platinum pop/R&B hit No Air as beaming audience members recorded video of her performance on their cellphones and sang along.

She then joined P.J. in reading them a short book and answering questions like, "Where do you come up with your songs?" ("Some of them are written by other people, and some of them I write myself.") and "How did you get on American Idol?" ("When I was 12 years old, I was watching when Kelly Clarkson won. I turned around and told my mom, 'I want to do that.'")

Sparks, who spent much of her youth in Glendale, Ariz., told the group that her faith is a big part of her life and that the passage from Jeremiah 29:11, which she often signs along with her autograph, has been near to her heart since she was in fifth grade. It reads, "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe, plans to give you a future full of hope."

Before passing out teddy bears to the children, she encouraged them to follow their dreams.

"Whether you want to be a doctor, lawyer, musician, do something with the spoken word or anything else, find somebody that you admire, like a mentor, who you can get advice from," Sparks said. "And just work hard. I would just say keep pushing and believe in yourself. You've got to believe in yourself."

Online: jordinsparksexperience.com

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Edition: MainSection: MetroPage: B05

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