

Money & Music

Financial planner leads a double life as a Christian singer

BY SUSAN LONG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARYANN BATES

For the past four years, Deborah Hightower has lived a double life.

Beginning when she was 19 she concentrated on her career as a financial planner, working her way up from a computer data-entry clerk at E.F. Hutton in Spartanburg, S.C., to vice president/investments at UBS Wealth Management today in Macon.

"I was lower than the janitor almost when I started out," Hightower said. "But I started learning about financial planning and the more I learned, the more intrigued I became."

Eventually she became an assistant to a financial adviser at E.F. Hutton who encouraged her to become licensed. When she turned 21, the firm sent her a birthday card that she'll never forget. "It said, 'Now you can come out and play with the big kids,'" Hightower recalled with a laugh.

A financial consultant position with Merrill Lynch brought her to Macon, where she completed a Bachelor of Science degree in business and finance at Mercer University and later married a fellow student. She joined UBS in 2006.

Along the way, she earned a Master of Arts Degree in organization and management from Capella University in Minneapolis and numerous professional designations and licenses.

Hightower finds financial planning a very satisfying career. But nearly four years ago, she had "a burning desire to do something with music."



Her first musical performance had been singing "Jesus Loves Me" at age 3 before her small country church in Liberty, S.C. She started taking piano lessons at 4, but "hated every minute of it."

"My father had such a gift for music. He could play a variety of instruments and so wanted me to do the same," said Hightower. She took piano lessons until she was 13, then finally talked her father into letting her take voice lessons. Two years later she stopped those but continued to sing in school and church choirs where she was often the featured

soloist.

Today, what was a love-hate relationship with music as a child has developed into a full-blown passion that has led to an award-winning dual career. "When your creative side comes out it's always scary," she said. "I became a financial planner by day and a musician by night."

Often compared to contemporary Christian singer Natalie Grant, who was named female vocalist of the year at the 2008 Gospel Music Association Dove Awards, Hightower has a rich, smooth, soaring soprano voice. She recorded her first CD, "Worship Him Alone" in 2005 in a studio in Macon. Her CD debut concert at The Grand Opera House included a 100-member community choir and a 12-piece band complete with a horn section as well as multicultural performances by local organizations.

"Her Name Is Deborah," Hightower's second CD, was recorded in Nashville with professional musicians and is being

marketed nationwide. A release party was held in Nashville, attended by industry executives and media representatives. The first single released from that album, "Sending Me Angels," wound up on the national Top 10 Inspirational Country Music Chart, peaking at No. 7. "If You Need a Miracle," peaked at No. 4 on the ICM charts and "I Know I Don't Walk on Water" was No. 14 at press time.

Hightower was nominated for ICM female vocalist of the year in 2008 and new artist of the year in 2007 and 2008. She also presented the song of the year

award at ICM's gala awards ceremony in October in Nashville, which honors the biggest names and emerging talent among Christian and inspirational country music artists. She's appeared on "Atlanta Live" on WATC-TV and recorded the theme song for "The Pastor's Heart," a program on Christian Television Network.

"The whole point of music in my view is that it softens the heart," said Hightower. "The spoken word can fall on deaf ears, but music communicates without someone feeling that they're being preached to. People don't feel threatened about music."

Three of the songs on her second album were co-written by Hightower and her husband, Eric, who had never written music before. A real estate agent with Coldwell Banker, Eric Hightower also owns a basketball training company for students ages 9 to college.

As a result of their successful collaboration, Hightower said she and her husband plan to write the majority of songs for her next album, which they hope to release late next year. Hightower spends many hours composing songs on her Yamaha baby grand piano in the foyer of her home on Lake Tobesofkee. The piano has a feature that allows her to record and then play back her compositions.

"Something I read or hear can spark an idea. Sometimes I find just one line I like, then build a song around that. I get the jive, then the song unfolds," Hightower said.

She has performed at a variety of venues from a small local Episcopal chapel to Carnegie Hall. In 2006 she sang in President's Park in Washington, D.C., as part of Christmas celebrations at the White House. She has a wide repertoire that will fit different circumstances. Recently she sang "How Great Thou Art" at Vineville Presbyterian Church and performed more contemporary inspirational music at The Ark, a Christian coffee house in Chicago.

She and her husband also have started a nonprofit ministry that works to expand "worship arts" through contemporary forms of dance, singing and instruments. "I grew up in the Baptist Church where if you even looked like you were having a good time, you were



Deborah Hightower balances her professional life with her career as a Christian singer.

told you were going to hell," said Hightower. "Young people especially want a more unregimented church experience. ... You're not diluting the message. It's the way you deliver it."

Hightower and her husband are members of the nondenominational Harvest Cathedral where contemporary worship arts are an integral part of church services. The church is also multicultural,

which Hightower feels is important.

How does she combine two careers? "Making time and just doing it. Have a plan," Hightower said. "Women so many times put their interests on the back burner. We put what we want behind other people's needs. We sell ourselves short."

"There are so many gifted women who have not ever exercised their gifts." **M**