

# She's Just Everyday People

Although she's performed for world leaders, gospel vocalist **NICOLE C. MULLEN** knows how to keep it real. This daughter of Pentecostal preachers hasn't forgotten her humble roots.

Nicole C. Mullen is tired. At least that's what she's saying. But despite the claim, she maintains a conversational pace that the most hyperactive human might find difficult to match.

Truth be told, Mullen really is worn down. She hasn't had a significant vacation in almost three years. But for her, the word "tired" means she has only five times the energy of the average person rather than the usual tenfold.

Mullen is a striking woman who keeps herself in good shape. She denies taking part in any formal weight lifting program, attributing her healthy physique to dancing and lifting her children. While we talk, she takes an occasional drink from a water bottle that contains a liquid she refers to as "lemonade."

It is later revealed that the concoction includes paprika, cayenne pepper and other mystery substances that are being used in a 10-day cleansing fast. As she swishes the juice around, the Gospel Music Association's reigning Female Vocalist of the Year offers up one of the day's countless gold nuggets of wisdom.

"I'm learning that a lot of times God's will is not always the easiest path," Mullen says. "You will have to cry sometimes. You have to take a step back to learn to go four steps forward. I'm learning not to buck God's will."

## Early Foundations

Mullen's lifelong learning process began in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she was born and raised. Going to church was as much a part of life as eating and sleeping. Both her grandfathers pastored Pentecostal churches, and her father, Napoleon Coleman Jr., was (and still is) a deacon at New Life Temple. She sang for the first time in church when she was 2 years old, and as a teenager, she sang with her older sisters, Marie and Teresa, in the youth choir their dad led.

Mullen was surrounded by an atmosphere of love and compassion for other children who didn't have a healthy home environment. Some of her aunts and uncles were adopted, and her own parents adopted both a boy, Steven, and a girl, Sandra. Mullen later adopted a child of her own, 8-year-old Max, the middle of three kids.

Not only did her extended family participate in adoption, they routinely took people in as guests and worked with foster children. Their kindness often extended to those in their church as well.

"We always had people staying in our house," Mullen says. "We'd go out on Friday nights after church to Burger King or whatever. We'd take some single moms with their kids. My dad would feed them too. It's been a tangible legacy that's been passed on from both sides of the family."

Thanks to her parents' example and strategic lifestyle management, Mullen also developed a deep love and respect for various cultures, races and backgrounds. She and her two older sisters attended a predominately white school, worshiped at a

predominately black church and grew up in a racially integrated neighborhood.

“Our world was always like that,” Mullen says. “We learned people are valuable regardless of the shade of their skin. We learned that we didn’t have to ignore the shade of our skin. We talk about that often from the stage.

“You don’t have to be colorblind. You don’t have to act like you don’t see what you see. You’re supposed to see it. You don’t look at the rainbow and see gray and white. You see the rainbow and enjoy it.”

The topic of racial unity in the church and in the world is one that surfaces often in Mullen’s music. Her song “Color” is just one example of how she tries to put a positive spin on what can often be a divisive or simply ignored issue.

Race and color are very personal issues for Mullen. Her husband, David, is white, and they have two biracial children: daughter Jasmine, who is 11, and son Josiah, 2. Their adopted son, Max, is black.

Mullen’s life wasn’t always as picture-perfect as it is now. After graduating from New Life Academy, she headed to Rockwall, Texas, to study at Christ for the Nations. She joined a vocal group called Living Praise and began pursuing a music career.

Mullen landed a deal with Frontline Records and released the 1991 project Don’t Let Me Go. It was produced by Tim Miner and blended elements of dance, R&B and pop.

But the big smile on her album cover quickly became a front for the pain she was experiencing in her first marriage. Mary Jane Coleman, Mullen's mother, says there was always a doubt in her mind that the union was going to work.

She even considered not attending the wedding in protest. After Mullen's first record released, the abusive nature of her relationship with her spouse became known.

"We kept the door open by me going to the wedding when I was not as comfortable and confident about the situation," Coleman says. "My advice to her was that divorce was not the unpardonable sin. It's a bad thing-divorce is. It's a tearing. But I'd rather have a daughter who's alive and divorced than one that might be dead."

Mullen continued pursuing her music career and traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, to promote her second album. There she met David Mullen, and the two struck up a professional relationship. Things were looking up for her ministry and career, but emotionally and spiritually, she was spent.

"It was probably one of the low points in my life," Mullen says. "I knew at that point that if anything was on trial in my life it was my faith.

"It was like: 'OK, what are you going to believe now? You grew up in church. You grew up saved, sanctified, filled with the Holy Ghost, the whole nine yards. So what are you going to do now? All the trippin' you just saw happened in the church. What are you going to believe now?'"

Healing came slowly. In the meantime, Mullen relocated to Nashville and became more active in the Christian music scene. She toured as a background vocalist and choreographer for David's solo tour and eventually landed supporting roles on the road with Amy Grant, the Newsboys and Michael W. Smith.

Mullen, who had experimented with songwriting when she was just 12 years old, continued to hone her talent with David. The two began writing together and eventually penned several songs for her second album. They also wrote some tunes for Carman's Yo Kidz series.

By the time the songwriting team had tied the knot three years after first meeting, a workable scenario had fallen into place. But Mullen admits that being married to a co-writer can be a precarious arrangement.

"We learned early on that we do better if we write together but not in the same room," Mullen says. "David is a very quick writer, and it takes me a little bit longer.

"I chew on it, and sometimes I'm trying to get to the point and it may not be exactly where I'm trying to go. But he's so fast. He already has a perfect song written."

The two often squabble over lyrics but usually one will eventually help the other finish a project. In fact, Mullen's first major songwriting breakthrough was a collaboration with her husband and Michael Oakes. "On My Knees," sung by Jaci Velasquez, went to the top of the charts and earned Mullen the first of many Dove Awards.

"I would not be half the writer I am without David," Mullen

says. "David has stretched me. He still does.

"I'll write a song and I'll understand it because I wrote it. But unless you've conveyed it completely to the person reading it or listening to it, you've got to go back to the drawing board."

There's no doubt that to date, Mullen's biggest songwriting success has come in the form of the inspirational classic "Redeemer." As part of her 2000 debut with Word Records, the song helped relaunch her solo career and established her as one of the most sought-after writers in the business. Strangely, the song doesn't reflect her greatest musical influences, yet somehow it has become synonymous with her career.

"I've been surprised and excited to see what God's done," she says. "A lot of people have praise reports about it. I know it's not me. That's not my doing. That's the Lord's doing. That's the Holy Spirit's doing. I'm not very smart, but I know enough to stay out of His way and not to take the credit for something that I didn't do."

But Mullen quickly learned that a successful radio hit can be just as difficult to deal with as a song that completely flops.

"It is a blessing on one hand," she says. "But on the other hand it's something that people will define you by without really knowing who you are.

"It's like saying: 'The only part of you that I like is your eyes. So when you come next time, only bring your eyes. I

don't want to see anything else of you. I just want to see your eyes.'

"But that's not me. Because to me, 'Redeemer,' 'Call on Jesus,' 'On My Knees' are a part of a puzzle. They're part of a journey."

Mullen gets especially frustrated when she feels as if concert promoters, churches and event coordinators want her for just one or two hits songs instead of her entire presentation, which includes energetic music, dancing and a healthy dose of God's Word.

"Don't waste my time," Mullen candidly says. "If you just want 'Redeemer,' hire the best singer in your church. I will send you my personal sound track."

On the other hand, she says, "If you want what we really bring, great, let's do it. Bring it on."

While not wanting to be defined by only one song, Mullen sees the unique benefit of having a singular song that the masses gravitate toward.

"This is one of God's little jokes," Mullen says. "'Redeemer' affords us the opportunity to talk about the issues that we as believers need to deal with, from racism to how to treat people socially. How do we take the same gospel of Jesus Christ and make it applicable to life? Because it is."

**Beyond Worship**

Mullen doesn't just preach about getting down and dirty with real life. She lives it out. One prime example is the Baby Girls Club. Mullen has been working with young girls from all backgrounds for years now, but about three years ago her daughter suggested something more consistent and structured.

The name came from an earlier Mullen song titled "Baby Girl," but the inspiration took hold years earlier when she herself was a "baby girl."

"No matter how many times your parents tell you that you're beautiful, you don't really believe them until somebody you look up to tells you," Mullen says. "This lady in my church named Cecilia did it for me.

"She was a great singer and she was beautiful. She was just the bomb. All the girls in the church wanted to be her.

"And she used to take me to her house and help me with my hair and help me with my singing. She just encouraged me. And I thought if it was ever my turn to give back to some other girls, I want to do for them what she did for me."

Through the Baby Girls Club, Mullen is doing exactly that. Once a week, several girls gather to hang out with her and some other women who spend time talking, praying and having fun with them. They teach the girls dance, drama, sewing, cooking and writing.

"Some of them have moms at home and some of them don't," Mullen says. "Some of my girls have got moms who do crack and sell it. Some of the stories break my heart. I'm their other mommy. I'm their auntie. I'm their big sister, friend,



confidante, their teacher, tutor, just whatever; their parole officer.

“They’re my girls. They’re my babies. Some of them call me all the time.”

Mullen says that when the girls give praise reports, they are sometimes on the comical side. She recalls one girl who took her advice and dealt with a conflict at school by talking it out instead of fighting. Others have seen improvements in their grades. In fact, one of her former Baby Girls recently earned a master’s degree and another has returned to help Mullen with the ministry.

“This is reality,” Mullen says. “Those little bitty milestones are worth more than any plaque that I put on my wall.”

For all of Mullen’s growing pains, she has been blessed with a measure of success that few have experienced. Her achievements include more than 20 combined Grammy and Dove nominations and multiple radio hits. The platform these have afforded her allows her to speak out against international problems such as hunger (through Compassion International) and slavery (through International Needs Network in Ghana).

Whatever causes she chooses to align with, Mullen is ultimately driven by a desire to worship God, see souls saved and encourage the church to be real and resist the temptation to fake its way through life on Earth.

“I don’t want to play it safe,” Mullen says. “It’s easy to get caught up with Christian jargon. We know how to get each other excited.

“But I’m not interested in giving each other goose bumps. I don’t want to worship worship. I don’t to be a worship leader for people who want to worship worship.

“If you want to worship Jesus Christ, let’s get it on. If you want to make other people hungry for the Jesus we say we serve, let’s get it on. Let’s bring it on. If we’re just going to have a ‘bless me’ club, I’d rather stay at home.”

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### **A Song for Brianna**

Nicole C. Mullen’s friendship with an 8-year-old blind girl taught the singer an amazing lesson about God’s love.

When it comes to personable, down-to-earth national recording artists, you’d be hard pressed to find someone who can stand toe-to-toe with Nicole C. Mullen. She routinely spends hours after a show meeting with fans and taking time to learn each and every person’s name. But even for this magnanimous Christian pop star, one particular encounter stands out.

In 2002 at Unity Festival in Michigan, Mullen met an 8-year-old blind girl named Brianna Nelson. Danelle, Brianna’s mother, remembers it as if it had just happened.

“She got down on her knees and just talked to Brianna,” Nelson recalls. “She signed her T-shirt, gave her a CD and hugged her. It was a one-on-one conversation. She was very good with Brianna.”

Mullen also took Brianna's hands and let her feel her face so she could create an image in her mind of what her hero might look like. The moment was clearly special to the girl and her mother-and Mullen was impacted as well.

"I see a lot of faces and I hear a lot of names," Mullen says. "Sometimes I remember the face but not the name. Sometimes it's the other way around. This time, I remembered the face and the name because when Jasmine and I left, we spoke about her. I remember praying for her in the van on the way out of the parking lot."

Mullen continued to pray for Brianna during the next few weeks but had no further contact with the family until she received a letter the following summer. A young lady from her staff brought it to her when she was preparing for a concert. The letter told of Brianna's tragic drowning death at a camp for blind children.

"I read it, and I remember just putting my jacket over my head and bawling," Mullen says. "It was just like a knife in the heart."

Later that year, Mullen reunited with Nelson at another concert in Grand Rapids. The two cried together and shared their memories of Brianna. Mullen was so moved by the story that she decided to write a song about it. The result was "Bye Bye Brianna," which landed on the latest project Everyday People.

"We have this hope in Christ that I wanted to remind us of," Mullen says. "I wanted to remind us in a story of a girl that I had met. ... The people may not have ever met Brianna, but

they have people in their own lives they hope to see again. ”

Since then, the Mullen family has stayed in touch with the Nelsons. For the July 4th holiday, the Nelsons drove from Michigan to Nashville so they could see Mullen in concert and spend some time with the family. More than anything, Nelson is happy to see her daughter's life memorialized in a way that can reach so many people.

“When she died, it was such a shock,” Nelson says. “I asked God why. She could have done much more. ... And now I look at the way she's touching people's lives, and one of those ways is through Nicole with the song.”