I was 6 years old and nothing was more thrilling to me than to watch my mother, who had sewn their great colorful costumes herself, rehearse with her theatre troupe. I could see the dancers sweating as they practiced their moves, backed up by singers shouting old tales from my West African country, Benin. Even though I could not understand the complex stories of Kings, Queens and battles, I knew every line and every dance.

Then one day the unthinkable happened. One of the singers was sick and didn’t show up for the performance. Suddenly Mom looked at me with strange eyes and said:

“I have listened to you and I’ve noticed you know her part well. Tonight you will go on stage and replace her.”

I knew I could sing—my family used to say I sung before I talked—but I could not picture myself in front of an audience. But I had no choice. At the last moment, I had to be pushed on stage, like someone jumping from a plane with a parachute. There was silence—a big silence; everyone was so surprised to see such a little girl. Then people started to laugh and cheer.
and that made me feel more relaxed and so I started to sing. I felt so good when I heard the clapping. I knew at that moment I would spend my whole life on stage!

I was more and more famous in Benin and I was able to make a living. It was sometimes tough because there is a big prejudice in my country against entertainers, who many people thought live a wild life, which was really not my case at all!

But I did start to think: “Why do I have to go to school, sit for hours in the classroom and work hard on my homework when I already have a job?” My grades started to fall until one day, my dad called me, and said “So you want to stop school and be a singer?”

“Yes Dad! This is exactly what I want to do. I need to practice my music, to learn new songs, to play with my band. I don’t have time for school!”

Although I didn’t think so at the time, I was really a very lucky teenager to have a father like I did, who told me in no uncertain terms. “This is not going to happen in my house. If you want to be a singer, I mean a great singer, you have to be educated. You have to be able to express all the beauty of the world in your music and your lyrics. You need to learn. I will make a deal with you; I am going to support your singing career but you have to go to school and get a good education.”

I have to admit I was mad at my Dad and couldn’t understand him at the time but he left me no choice. I kept going to school and he kept his promises. He produced my first big show in Togo when the original promoter quit saying I was too petite and no one could see me on stage! After all these years, I am so grateful to my father. I now know he was right. The education I received has allowed me to travel the whole world, to be confident enough to sing and to speak in front of all kinds of people, even Kings and Queens!

I just want all the children of my continent to be lucky like me and to have an education so they can fulfill their dreams like I fulfilled mine!

Angélique Kidjo

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