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AURORA IDOL RUNNER-UP BECOMES 'LEGEND'

BET network TV show: Old friends watch former singing contestant on reality television

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AURORA -- On a recent episode of *Blowin' Up!*: Fatty Koo, a huge boyish grin spreads across Josh Welton's face as he looks straight into the camera.

"I'm ready," the 15-year-old says, after he hears he's earned a spot in the new singing group Fatty Koo. "The legend begins."

The former Aurora Idol runner-up has become the talk of more than just one town ever since he shined at last summer's *Downtown Alive!* singing competition.

Already, his name is popping up all over Internet blogs and message boards, and his New Jersey co-stars have plenty to say about him.

"You can just hear the potential in

his voice," gushes Gabrielle Travis on the show.

But it's his friends back home, devotedly watching his BET reality series, who are Welton's biggest fans. The show follows the group of six young singers as they try to make an album and hit it big. Fatty Koo started as an up-and-coming group of three girls and two guys from Columbus, Ohio, who got signed by Sony Urban/DAS/Columbia Records.

When Welton was added to the group in the last four episodes, it came as no surprise to Paramount Theatre's executive director, Diana Martinez, who watched the young performer charm fans in the Aurora Idol competition.

As Welton hones his performance skills on the East Coast, his Aurora friends say he's still the same kid who once performed anti-bullying skits at Waldo Middle School. He still has the same sense of humor, the same take-charge attitude.

In one episode, Welton's leadership style angers fellow Fatty Koo member Ron Riley, but his Aurora friends say that's the same ambitious approach he's always taken.

"He hasn't changed a bit," says friend Jeremy Jones. "He's always been real determined."

Though he's moved into the fast-paced music industry, Welton even continues wearing the same symbol he proudly displayed at home. In his press photos, a combination lock is secured around his belt loop -- a sign that he's "locking up" his abstinence until marriage.

"It's incredible seeing a friend of mine on TV," says former classmate Jared Marchiando-Muhammad, whose cell phone ring tone plays the Fatty Koo song Bounce. "He's just performing and being himself. This is how he's always been."

Marchiando-Muhammad and another friend, Michael Lemke, say they regularly receive phone calls from Welton, who likes to ask them about events at home more than he likes to chat about his newfound stardom. Neither of Welton's old friends express any sign of jealousy as they marvel at his new life.

"It's great," says Lemke, who hasn't been able to catch an episode of the BET show but plans to watch it when he gets time off from baseball practice. "It's such a good thing for him."

Clayton Muhammad, an East Aurora administrator who's stayed close to Welton, echoes the teen's own words as he describes the excitement his hometown buddies feel.

"The legend is starting," Muhammad says.