

The shy, nervous fourth grader stared out at the sea of faces before him.

It was James Beeks' turn to lead the national anthem in front of the class. He belted it out the best way he knew how, and the class was silent.

"James," his teacher said. "You have a real talent; you have a wonderful voice. You need to be in the talent show."

That memory has stuck with Beeks for 20 years. He said he has finally made it to the talent show -- the talent show. He is appearing on Broadway in the cast of Ragtime: The Musical.

Next week, the Jacksonville native will be returning home to perform as Judas in a production of **Jesus Christ Superstar** at the Florida Theatre.

But home doesn't remind Beeks of warm meals and soft sheets. It reminds him of a broken family, abuse and poverty. Beeks and his older brother, Terrence Beeks, spent five years in Jacksonville's foster care system, years filled with pain and fear.

As a young child, one foster family forced him to eat as fast as he could until he almost threw up. He had to race his brother to finish dinner every night.

"She [his foster parent] had a bat under the chair, and she would hit me in the head . . . and tell me to keep going," he said.

Beeks said he wanted to show the social workers his scars and bruises. He wanted to get away. He could tell stories like that one for hours. But his foster parents threatened to kill him if he did, so he didn't utter a peep.

At age 7, he moved in with his grandmother, Altamease Edwards, who was busy taking care of 10 other children. They ate lima beans and rice for dinner and carried buckets of hot water to the house to bathe. They lived in poverty, and Beeks was often ignored.

As an escape, Beeks watched Star Search religiously. His favorite performers were Victor Cook and Billy Porter.

"I said, `Grandma, I want to sing like that,'" he said. (Ironically, Beeks later replaced Cook and Porter in Broadway shows.)

His grandmother enrolled him in the Douglas Anderson School of the Arts when he was in seventh grade. He was in the first class to complete all six years there. "He really could sing," Edwards remembers.

"Douglas Anderson School of the Arts saved my life," Beeks said.

Music gave him a voice. His parents may have never told him "I love you," but the crowd did.

"You could tell in eighth grade that he was special," said Cathy Murphy, who was the music teacher at Douglas Anderson. "He had that something, that sparkle. That stage presence was already there. Not to mention that beautiful voice."

"He was a very, very talented young man with a great deal of ambition and drive and talent," remembered Jane Condon, then the principal at Douglas Anderson. "I'm not at all surprised at his success."

With applause, Beeks' confidence grew. He was able to release the pain that mounted inside of him from his difficult childhood. Singing was his first love; it taught him that he could move past his abuse.

"I had an outlet," he said. "If I wasn't allow to sing, I don't know what I would do."

After graduating from Douglas Anderson in 1990, Beeks attended Jacksonville University to study music. But he decided to chase his dream and left Jacksonville in 1991. Beeks performed at Disney World, on a cruise ship and at a casino in Louisiana, but he wasn't where he wanted to be. That wasn't the real talent show.

In 1996, he moved to New York. "I had 20 bucks in my pocket, and I said, `I'm gonna do it,'" Beeks said. He lived with friends until he could afford to live on his own. It wouldn't be long.

Within three months, Beeks landed a lead role in Smokey Joe's Cafe on Broadway. "I heard the Smokey Joe's Cafe CD and I said, `I must do this show,'" he said.

Thus he became the first Douglas Anderson student to land a role in a Broadway show. "One million people audition for roles on Broadway every year, and there are only 30 shows," said Murphy. "That tells you how special James is."

Beeks called his grandmother with the good news. "I said, `Grandma, I'm going to be singing on Broadway, I'm going to be in Smokey Joe's Cafe, and she said, `Are you on TV yet?'" Beeks laughed.

His grandmother, who is in poor health, hasn't made it to Broadway to see Beeks perform. But she has seen him sing on television. "It was pretty good," she said. "Pretty good.

As a boy, Beeks looked up to two Michaels: Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson. He admired their success, their hard work and their drive. He even wrote a song about them called Two Michaels. Beeks said that young black males have too few positive role models, and that needs to change.

Next year, he plans to release his first CD as an independent singer/songwriter. Success as a recording artist is his ultimate goal. Most important to him, though, is his goal to help abused children. He wants kids to see they can move beyond their troubled pasts.

"I want to use it [music] to touch kids and to change kids' lives," he said.

Beeks said he isn't angry about his abuse. He has never sought professional help -- his performances have been his therapy. Recently, he began to keep a journal to organize his thoughts. Eventually, he wants to turn his entries into an autobiography.

"Looking at it [his abuse] on paper, and reading it as I went through it, I cried and cried and cried," he said. "It was like a cleansing experience for me. I look back on it, and I know myself now, I know where I came from, and I want to use it to help other people."