

19 REAL-LIFE STORIES OF HOPE AND INSPIRATION

# Guideposts

MAY 2006

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**NOT MY KID!**  
A FAMILY FACES UP TO  
METH ADDICTION

Once, when I was a boy, someone granted me a very special wish. Now it was my turn

# One Last Song

by Kevin Sharp  
Nashville, Tennessee

**IN THE SUMMER OF 1988,** between my junior and senior years of high school, I was your average kid with his whole life in front of him. I had two great pas-

sions: sports and music. I knew I would eventually be a country music star. In the meantime, I was going to be a part of as many winning football and basket-

ball games as possible. Then my left leg started hurting. At first I joked about it. But by the end of summer, when the pain still hadn't gone away, the

**SHARP'S NOT FLAT** Kevin and his band doing a song from his hit album

joke stopped being funny.

I went to a doctor. "It must be an old sports injury," he said. "It'll clear up in time."

But it didn't. My bad days turned into bad weeks. Senior year I had to sit out both football and basketball seasons. I lost weight and broke out in sweats. I went to my prom on crutches. That summer I got a part in a musical theater company, but had to drop out after I collapsed on stage. *What's going on?* I wondered.

Then one day a friend found me on the floor of my room, barely breathing. My parents rushed me to the hospital. This time, after blood tests, X rays and an MRI, the doctors had a real diagnosis—Ewing's Sarcoma: bone cancer.

The doctors told me I could undergo a course of radiation and chemotherapy that was still in the experimental stages. There were no guarantees. The odds weren't very good. But it was my only hope.

Chemo. Even today, my body reacts just to the word. The pain and the nausea are so intense that it can feel like your soul itself is being poisoned. In



the heaviest period of my treatments, I would throw up the minute I walked through the hospital doors because my body knew what was coming.

But the worst of it was the loneliness. Even though family and friends visited all the time, the illness made me feel cut off. I felt like I'd died without leaving the world. While my friends went on with their lives, I entered a place I'd never known existed before: a place that wasn't life, but wasn't death either. A no-man's-land of white hospital walls and an iso-

**He asked me something  
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lation so deep it sometimes felt like not even God could reach me through it.

Music kept me going. I was the kind of music fan who read the liner notes of records. I studied the arrangements of the songs I loved and knew the names of writers, producers and session players the way other kids know the names of ball players and game stats. Not just country, either.

From gospel to pop, from Chicago to Barry Manilow, I loved it all. During the worst times of my illness, I held onto that love like a lifeline. On good days in the hospital, I'd sing to other kids on the ward—maybe even get out my guitar and pick along. On bad days, I'd lie in bed and imagine myself belting out a country tune to a full auditorium. I'd look out in my imagination on that sea of faces and the loneliness would ease up a little. God was using my love of music as a way to get me through my illness. I was sure of that.

My first round of chemotherapy didn't get rid of the cancer, so the doctors prescribed a new round of it: a chemical onslaught so brutal it was guaranteed to either kill the cancer—or me. My days at the hospital grew longer. My precious days at home, where I could at least be in my own bed, grew fewer. It got harder and harder to imagine that future audience of

country music fans. And harder to remember that God was out there too.

Four months into this new treatment, a woman I'd never seen before came to my bedside in the hospital. "I'm from the Make-A-Wish Foundation," she said. "We'd like to fulfill a wish of yours. Going somewhere you've never gone. Doing something you've never done. Or meeting someone special. Is there anyone special you'd like to meet, Kevin? Anyone at all. You give me the name and we'll do everything possible to make it happen."

Make-A-Wish? I knew the kind of kids they came to see. *They must think I'm going to die*, I thought.

But that didn't mean I wasn't going to take these folks up on their offer. I gave them a name. "David Foster. He's a music producer. He's produced tons of my favorite performers. Including my favorite group of all, Chicago."

"That's great," the lady said. "We'll see what we can do." Shortly after our talk, I was on a plane to Los Angeles. Normally the flight would have wiped me out. But my excitement was such a charge that I wasn't tired at all. Walking into David's music studio, I felt like I'd stepped out of a nightmare and into my

wildest fantasy. There were gold records on the walls and recording equipment everywhere—stuff so fancy I didn't even know what most of it did.

David appeared and shook my hand. Then he introduced me to someone else. "I hear you're a Chicago fan," he said. "Kevin, meet James Pankow."

Not only had David invited me to his studio—he'd arranged for a horn player and songwriter of my favorite group to be there too. The folks at Make-A-Wish didn't fool around. They really did make dreams come true.

"We're in the middle of working on a song," he said. "Want to watch?"

"You bet I do," I said.

During a break, David took me aside and asked me about my life: my interests, my singing...then he asked me something no one ever had before—at least in such a straightforward fashion. He asked me if I was going to die. "I don't know," I told him. "But I sure don't plan on it."

As soon as I heard myself say those words, some of that deep-down fear lifted. I felt peace and reassurance. I knew I was in God's hands. I wasn't alone.

Several months after that visit with David, the doctors once again sat my



**YOU'RE THE INSPIRATION**  
*Kevin meets his idol, David Foster, producer for the band Chicago.*

parents and me down. "It's gone, Kevin," one of them said. "It's all gone. This last round of chemo did the trick. You've beaten a virtually unbeatable cancer."

If there is one thing that might be more shocking than hearing a death sentence, it's hearing that death sentence lifted. Finding your way back into life after being taken out of it for so long is harder than you might imagine. In fact, the road back was, in its way, every bit as hard as the illness itself.

I had been sick so long that I didn't really know *how* to be healthy, even if the doctors told me I was. I still walked with a limp, my body was covered in scars and my hair was still so thin that I finally de-

cidied just to shave it all off.

But I was still sure I was to be a famous country singer. Eventually a friend became my songwriting partner, and together we built a studio in my parents' garage. I started laying down tracks—tracks I was genuinely proud of.

Shopping them around wasn't easy, but I refused to get discouraged by any negative response. *What's a "no" from a record company compared to bone cancer?* I thought.

I kept David up on my progress. One day I got a call from his office. They were putting together a new record label and asked if I had a demo tape.

Sometime later, I was back at David's studio, this time with a room full of

stone-faced record executives staring at me.

After I finished, one of those executives came over and shook my hand. "Let's do it," he said simply. I looked over at David. He was grinning. My life's dream had just come true.

My first single was a song called "Nobody Knows." It talked about loneliness, about being shut away from the world. On a personal level, it was the song of someone who had

wanted to meet the guy who sang "Nobody Knows."

Again, because of Make-A-Wish, I was on a plane. Now I was the one who was asked to fulfill a dying boy's wish. What would I say? How could I be the perfect Make-A-Wish person that David had been to me?

I walked into a hospital room crowded with life-support machines. Matthew was barely conscious. His eyes were on me, but

## Matthew was beyond talking. But I knew what I had to say to him.

experienced the special kind of isolation that only a person who is young and terminally ill can feel. Unbelievably, the song shot to the top of the country-music charts.

One day I got a call. It was from Make-A-Wish. A seven-year-old boy named Matthew in Houston, Texas, was battling cancer. The doctors didn't think he had much time left. Make-A-Wish had asked him if there was anyone he wanted to meet. Yes, the boy had told them. He

he couldn't speak. I sat down by his bedside. Every few minutes a nurse had to use a suction device to clear his windpipe. A talk, like I'd had with David Foster, was out of the question. Matthew was beyond talking. He'd gone deep into that no-man's-land of illness. Deeper, I knew, than even I had.

Finally, I took my guitar out of its case and sang the song that had brought me to Matthew's side. I suddenly knew what I had to say to this young man. But

I also knew I could only tell it to him alone.

"Is it all right if we have a few moments together?" I asked.

"Sure," Matthew's dad said. Everyone left the room. It was just Matthew, me and all those machines keeping him alive. I leaned in close and looked him right in the eye.

"Listen," I said. "This might sound funny but I know what you're feeling. I was sick for a long time too. In a bed like this. Alone. Afraid. For some reason I didn't die. But whatever happens, I want you to know that God is always with you. He loves you more than you could ever know. You're never, ever alone."

And again, I had that feeling deep inside, a feeling of peace and assurance.

Matthew passed away just a few short days later. But meeting him—just for that brief moment—is something that will live with me forever.

On the day of my Make-A-Wish meeting with David Foster, I didn't know I would live. But I knew I would never be alone. I believe that years later in that hospital bed in Houston, Matthew knew it too. ■

*Adapted from Tragedy's Gift: Surviving Cancer The Kevin Sharp Story by Kevin Sharp with Jeanne Gere. ZassCo Publishing, Cincinnati, Ohio.*