

Concert series celebrates girl's short life

By Sarah Bultema
Loveland Reporter-Herald

When Abby French was born, her parents already knew their little girl would be severely developmentally disabled.

"The prognosis was not too good at all," said Abby's mother, Christy French of Fort Collins. "They gave her a life expectancy of a couple of years."

Once at home, Abby wasn't able to speak or move much and spent most of her time lying in bed in the family's living room.

However, even though their daughter was wordless, Abby's parents soon found a way to communicate.

Music.

"They always say music touches a different part of our brains, so we played a lot of music for Abby," Christy said. "Music was always a part of her life in our home."

Christy, a pianist, would play the piano, while her sons would often accompany on cello and saxophone.

"There was hardly ever a time that there wasn't music going on," Christy said. "That was always a very peaceful time."

Soon, other musicians and friends of the family began stopping by the house to play for the little girl, who they in turn got to know and love as well.

"She had this amazing ability to touch people," Abby's mother said. "We all learned things from her I don't think we could have learned any other way."

As years went by, Abby defied the doctors' expectations for her, living far beyond the time they thought she'd have.

In June 2000, when she was 10 years old, Abby died.

Yet even though she's gone, the youngster who touched so many continues to enrich the lives of others through an annual concert series held in her honor.

Abby's Signature Concert Series, which hosts three concerts each year, shares the music Abby adored while also raising money for two nonprofits that helped her in life.

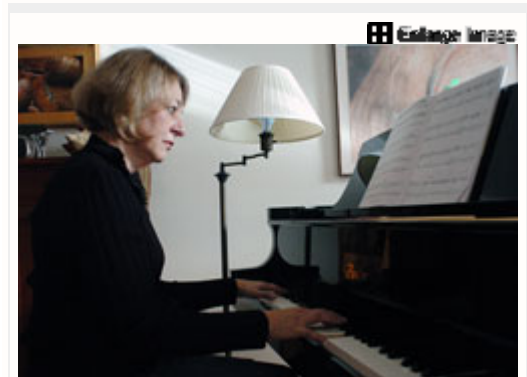
This Monday, a Christmas concert of the series will be performed at the First Presbyterian Church in Fort Collins.

"It's a really special thing to do in her memory," Christy said.

The event started in 1996 when Christy was asked to play Christmas songs for a few family members and friends.

Soon, other musicians — many of whom once played for Abby — joined the event, and it soon grew into a major fundraising campaign in the little girl's honor.

The concert is free, but donations are accepted to benefit Respite Care and Pathways Hospice, two nonprofits that assisted Abby and her family for years.



Reporter-Herald/Steve Stoner
Fort Collins resident Christy French practices a song Friday on the piano in her home in preparation for an upcoming concert in honor of her daughter, Abby, who passed away in June 2000 at the age of 10.

If You Go

What: Abby's Signature Concert Series, a fundraising concert to benefit Pathways Hospice and Respite Care.

When: 10-11 a.m. and 5:30-6:30 p.m. Monday.

Where: The First Presbyterian Church, 531 S. College Ave. in Fort Collins.

Cost: Free; donations accepted.

Contact: Call 207-9435 or 663-3500.

Respite Care provides developmentally disabled children in Larimer County an opportunity to exercise and play while giving their families time to rest.

Pathways Hospice helps those in Larimer County through the end of their life.

“We would not have made it as a family without their help,” Christy said of the nonprofits. “I cannot say enough about the work they continue to give families in Larimer County.”

Those at the nonprofits are thrilled to be a part of the event.

Not only has the concert series raised more than \$200,000 to split between the agencies, but it’s also carried on the spirit that Abby encompassed.

“It goes beyond the dollars raised to create a holiday spirit of acceptance,” said LeAnn Massey, assistant director of Respite Care. “It has given us such a positive light.”

Kim Mueller of Pathways Hospice agreed.

“It’s quite a tribute to Abby ... and really recognizes that every individual in this world makes a difference,” she said. “Despite what challenges they may face as individuals, they’re all part of a greater community that loves and supports and cares for each other.”

Coordinators hope community members will attend the instrumental Christmas performance to not only give back, but also to simply be thankful for what they have.

“It’s an hour when people can just stop, reflect and really a time to be grateful,” Christy said.

“Because we are all so blessed.”

© Copyright 2009 Loveland Publishing Co. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.