

Kevin Sharp inspires at benefit concert

By Gregory A. Summers - Features Editor

It only took five words to stop country music artist Kevin Sharp in his tracks Saturday night.

Members of Douglas Presbyterian Church's Relay For Life team were wearing T-shirts with "We believe" printed on the front and "in Kevin Sharp" printed on the back.

An emotional Sharp - a cancer survivor - who was seen both ups and downs in life, including the dog-eat-dog music business - wept.

The man who came here for a benefit concert at Lancaster High School auditorium to inspire those facing their own battles against cancer found renewed hope in those five words.

"I know it's kind of stupid, but it means a lot to me," Sharp said, as he wiped away the tears. "Life is tough and sometimes it downright sucks. But it's worth it and we are lucky to have each other every day.

"Medicine is important, but the things that treat the heart, mind and soul far outweigh them," Sharp said. "That's what hope is all about. Hope is the most valuable gift we have in life."

Sharp shared his story of hope between singing songs with band members Brad McFarland and John Shaw.

Sharp was diagnosed with Ewings sarcoma (a rare form of bone cancer) in 1989 and told his chance of survival was slim. The cancer had metastasized to his lungs and he was given a 20 percent chance to live.

Those odds are something Amber Cassell and Taylor King understand well. The two got a chance to meet Sharp backstage.

Taylor, 7, is one of the state's Make-A-Wish Foundation children. The Belton youngster has been declared dead 12 times in his brief life.

"He was screaming all the way here," said his mother, Amy King. "He was excited about the chance to meet Kevin. We can't hardly leave the house without his CD playing."

Amber, a 15-year-old freshman at Rock Hill High School, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma when she was 6 years old. The sixth leading cancer in children under age 16, osteosarcoma results in infections and tumors at the end of long bones, usually at the end of the tibia or femur.

Amber has undergone leg surgery 10 times, including a hip replacement for a staph infection.

"I know every medicine that you need," she said.

Although Amber doesn't know Tammy Catoe, the two share the same bond; Catoe was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in October 2006.

Catoe underwent total knee replacement surgery in January and had most of her right tibia and part of her right femur removed.

The 39-year-old mother of two is also going through the rigors of chemotherapy and now uses a walker to get around.

Catoe was the first in line Saturday to see Sharp.

"Sometimes you just want to give up," Catoe said.

"I had heard about his book ("Tragedy's Gift") and got a copy of it and couldn't put it down," she said. "I read it in one day and what he went through inspired me to keep going."

Sharp said it's those like Taylor, Amber, Catoe and others battling cancer that need encouraging words to "keep on keeping on."

Despite his cancer battle, Sharp said he never gave up his dream of becoming a singer.

"You have to have a passion for success in life," Sharp said. "I don't know where I'd be without it."

That passion inspired Sharp to never give up as he fought through two years of chemotherapy, experimental drugs and radiation treatment. The experience led to Sharp's being a "Make-A-Wish" child at age 18, which opened up the doors to his music career. Through the foundation, Sharp was introduced to his music idol, David Foster, who helped him secure a recording contract.

Foster doesn't have a household name as an artist, although the Canadian record producer/arranger and composer has won 14 Grammy awards.

Some of Foster's work includes Earth, Wind and Fire's "After the Love is Gone," "Unforgettable" by Natalie and Nat King Cole and 1993's Album and Record of the Year for "The Bodyguard" soundtrack.

"Girls hated to go to the movies with me because I always wanted to stay for the credits and see who wrote what song," Sharp said, laughing.

Sharp went from singing telegrams and performing at a California theme park to a music success story.

He registered a platinum debut album, "Measure of a Man," which included the hit single, "Nobody Knows." The song topped Billboard's Country Single's chart for four weeks in 1997.

But since then, Sharp's career has hiccuped, through no fault of his own.

The record label he signed with folded, so he signed with another label that folded, too.

"When everything is working to your benefit, you don't learn a heck of a lot," Sharp said between songs.

"When we're beaten up by life is when we have to learn," he said. "We keep forgetting just how forgiving the good Lord is. All he really requires is that we try."

But through the ups and downs, Sharp continues to inspire others through concerts and as a motivational speaker, author and wish granter and spokesman for the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

"He's one of these guys who shares himself," said Jeff Roper of 92 New Country in Columbia, who emceed the concert.

"That's probably why he has trouble fitting in," Roper said.

Catoe said Sharp has nothing to worry about.

"I think he's doing what he needs to be doing," she said. "I feel a whole lot better about things now."

Relay for Life

Lancaster's annual Relay For Life begins Friday at Lancaster Memorial Stadium and runs through 6 a.m. Saturday. Entertainment starts at 6 p.m. Friday, with a survivor's lap at 7 p.m. and a luminary lighting service at 10 p.m.

Relay for Life is a fundraising event for the American Cancer Society that spreads awareness of cancer prevention, celebrates surviving cancer and raises money for research to find cures for cancer.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, cancer is now the second leading cause of death in the United States. It is expected to become the leading cause of death in the next decade.

"I know firsthand the difference Relay can make," Sharp said. "Sometimes, we don't get together as a community and we definitely don't know our neighbors like we used to. It's good to see people come together for a cause."