



# the joy of play

christy•french

For much of her 10 years, Abby French was surrounded by music, an influence that appeared to calm her and perhaps ease the hardships she faced because of severe developmental disabilities.

Most of the time, it was her mother Christy playing piano. Sometimes, it was an impromptu saxophone concert by a family friend. Or maybe just a recording of soothing music.

Today, Christy uses music to honor the memory of her daughter through Abby's Signature Concert Series, a series of performances held to raise money for Hospice and Respite Care.

Only 15 weeks into her pregnancy with Abby, her third child, Christy and her husband Tom received news no parents want to hear – tests showed the baby wasn't developing properly. The doctors knew the baby would have disabilities, but it was unclear just how severe they would be.

Christy and Tom knew their future would be filled with uncertainties, but they knew they would love this baby, just as they had their two boys, with all their heart.

Abby was born with disabilities that left her brain both unusually small and smooth. She also suffered a seizure disorder. As a result, she never progressed developmentally beyond the newborn stage, unable to sit up, talk, roll over or even laugh. She was confined most of the time to a bed in the family's living room and required round-the-clock care.

When Abby was around 11 months old, Christy turned to Hospice and Respite Care, a short-term care facility for children with developmental disabilities.

“We would have never survived without them,” Christy said, “and we would have never stayed intact as a family.”

When Abby was at Respite Care, Christy and Tom would spend time with their boys, Will and Jesse, who were just 2 and 4.

The people at Respite Care embraced Abby, so Christy felt she could trust them with her daughter.

“They loved her in an unconditional way,” Christy said. “It was, and still is, an amazing place.”

As the challenges of life mounted, Christy found solace

**ARTICLE BY KERRIE FLANAGAN • JOURNEY CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

Piano photograph ©istockphoto.com / René Mansi • Christy photograph by Kerrie Flanagan  
Christy and Abby photograph courtesy of Christy French

in music. In the evenings when Tom and the boys were asleep, Christy played the piano for Abby – and for herself.

“I would sit down at night and play and cry,” Christy said. “It became a real vehicle for my emotions. It was a time I could be alone.”

Christy soon realized that Abby seemed to enjoy the music as well.

*“Abby’s responses were very subtle, but I know the music spoke to her and calmed her in such a way that maybe something else couldn’t,” she said.*

When her brothers were older, they played for her. Christy’s good friend Dave Lunn, a saxophone player, would visit the French house, where he and Christy would give Abby her own personal concerts.

Around the time Abby was about 5, Christy started an annual concert for her and Tom’s parents and their friends at a local church. It started small and each year, more people came.

Christy added a couple of more concert dates and so things went for a few years. During that time, Abby’s health worsened and her care became more difficult. Hospice and Respite Care was there for the French family and Christy felt indebted to the facility. She decided to pass an offering plate around after a concert and people generously gave. This soon became the new protocol at her concerts.

Christy also wanted to make sure Abby always had music around, so she decided to make a recording with music by one of her favorite artists, Michael Card, that could be played when Christy wasn’t there. Christy, Dave and a few other musicians who volunteered to go into the studio recorded “Joy,” a collection of soothing instrumental music that evokes emotion.

“Abby’s name meant ‘to Joy,’” Christy said, smiling. “There was something about her that was bigger than you could really put your finger on. There was such joy in her life even though this little kid couldn’t do anything. She really spoke volumes in her silence.”

With Michael Card’s permission, a limited number of 1,000 CDs was made. Christy gave these out at no charge, asking only that people give to Hospice and Respite Care if they could.

“We’ve received anywhere from \$1 to \$500 for the CD,” Christy said.

In the wake of the CD’s success, Christy headed back into the studio with a handful of talented musicians and recorded “Peace.”

“The CD was complete in 2000 and when it came, I played it for Abby. A few days later, she died,” Christy said. “She did have a hard life. It was 10 years of a really tough struggle and we miss her greatly,

but I know Abby wouldn’t trade places now. She wouldn’t want to be back here. There is a peace in her death.”

Exhaustion, fatigue and grief filled the first couple of years after Abby’s death. Christy wondered at times if her family was going to stay intact through it all. But just as they had done in the past, using their strong faith and love for each other, they survived and pulled through it even stronger.

In 2005, a friend approached Christy about making her concerts more cohesive and giving them more of a purpose. Together with some ladies at Linden Press, they came up with a logo, dates, invitations with Abby’s story on them and Abby’s Signature Concert Series was born. All the money raised at these concerts benefits Hospice and Respite Care. Each event raises anywhere from \$4,000 to \$12,000.

“These concerts keep me in contact with these agencies,” Christy said. “I just hope I can always give back to them.”

With the concert series going strong, Christy wanted to do one last CD, this one with her son Will, who plays cello. It is named “Hope.”

“I did feel hopeful,” she said. “There was hope that could come to other children through Respite Care. There was hope in hospice because they work so closely with families who are struggling with someone at the end of life. The end of Abby’s life was not the end.”

A close friend of Christy’s, Mims Harris, describes her as the most genuinely thoughtful

and caring person she knows. Anyone who meets Christy would know instantly that this statement is absolutely true.

With her boys off at college, Christy, a caretaker at heart, has found others to care for. Her part-time work at Allnutt Funeral Services allows her to help and support grieving families. A 97-year-old friend knows she can count on Christy to run errands with her, to listen to her and to just love her.

As Christy sits at the grand piano that now fills the space where Abby’s bed used to be, she shares the one big lesson she learned from her little girl.

“Life is a gift,” she said. “All we have is today...God gave us a different perspective of life through Abby. *It’s precious and fragile and you don’t take it for granted.*” ❖



The “Hope” CD will be available late Jan. 2007. Contact 207-9435 / [www.hlchospice.org](http://www.hlchospice.org) / [www.respitecareinc.org](http://www.respitecareinc.org) for details and concert dates.



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A photograph showing a collection of several diamond rings of various designs, including solitaires and channel-set bands, arranged on a dark surface.