

MUSIC FOR SENIORS

Liz Kelly uses talent to honor her beloved late father

The very personal reason that drives the director of



Liz Kelly greets seniors March 17 after The Ukedelics performance at FiftyForward Martin Center as part of the “Music for Seniors” Free Daytime Concert Series presented by CenterWell Senior Primary Care. DENNY SIMMONS / THE TENNESSEAN

Her dad died in 2005, but she lost him about four years before that. ● Dementia. #9654;● In those four years, he slowly lost his speech, memory and his impulse control. Sometimes, he’d try to open the car door as it was moving and start to get out.

● Then his motor skills and his mobility faded. Perhaps the cruelest part of dementia is that its victims often realize they are losing the ability to do what they always could. Her dad often got scared, anxious, agitated. ● And angry.

“He tried to talk but couldn’t get the words out. He was so frustrated,” Liz Kelly said.

“It was heartbreaking. It was torture to see his decline.”

Only one thing consistently calmed him. Music. Kelly provided that comfort in his final years.

For the last two years, Kelly, 45, has served as executive director of Nashville nonprofit Music for Seniors, which provides free live performances for the elderly. It’s a job that honors lessons her dad taught her and honors the way she stayed connected with him as he was dying.

Hoping to be the next Amy Grant



By the time she was 5, Kelly could no longer keep her little fingers off the ornate wooden upright piano her grandfather got years ago.

The girl plinked on the keys nearly every day, hoping one day to perform and record like her musical idol, Amy Grant.

Her father, John Chamberlain, pastor of the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Ithaca, New York, only allowed Christian and gospel music to be played at home. The preacher wanted to avoid exposing his six children to ungodly behaviors any earlier than necessary.

So Kelly kept going back to that piano until she started working out pieces of hymns.

“She really was diligent,” her mother, Laurie Marshall, said. “And we’d recognize songs before long. Her dad would sit and listen while I was cooking meals.”

She and her dad often sang songs around the house, sometimes just some silly things he made up. By age 10, she was playing during church services on the congregation’s beautiful concert grand piano.

By 12, she went with her father as he visited some seniors who were unable to leave their homes. By 13, her father started taking her with him to nursing homes Sunday afternoons to play piano for services he’d lead there.



Top: Liz Kelly draws winners in the raffle at FiftyForward Martin Center as part of the “Music for Seniors” Free Daytime Concert Series presented by CenterWell Senior Primary Care on March 17. Above: Kelly greets seniors after The Ukedelics performance. PHOTOS BY DENNY SIMMONS/THE TENNESSEAN

Kelly got overwhelmed by the old people in wheelchairs, some unable to speak, some disheveled. She wasn’t sure how to approach them, was concerned she might accidentally hurt them — until she watched her dad interact with them one-on-one.

“When he’d take someone by the hand, it made me more comfortable to take someone by the hand,” Kelly said.

Soon, Kelly had her dad’s touch. “Liz was very sweet with the seniors,” her mom said. “She entered right in. She and her dad have that compassion-first kind of nature.”

Kelly said it was much easier to speak with the nursing home residents after she played piano.

“The music always unlocked something and changed the room,” she said. “It made people more talkative and more happy. It was magic. It created connection and turned a light on.”

That connection made Kelly feel seen in a way she hadn’t felt before.



Heartbeat Brad Schmitt Nashville Tennessean USA TODAY NETWORK – TENN.

“It made me feel like I mattered, like I made a difference,” she said. “And that made me want to come back.”

‘A clarity that came to his eyes’

Kelly got annoyed when her dad started to mispronounce some words when she was around 17. The word “oil” really seemed to trip him up. Soon, though, she and her family realized something was wrong.

She was 19 and working for a nonprofit in Schenectady, New York, when the rest of the family went to Virginia to be near relatives there. Kelly stayed in New York to keep working for the nonprofit and to play keyboards in a Christian band, Two Pews Back, that toured churches regionally, a band in which she’d meet her future husband.

Kelly visited her father every few months in a memory care facility in Virginia.

“Eventually, he couldn’t speak and couldn’t write,” Kelly said. “He was so frustrated. The agitation was the worst.”

Kelly’s mom set up a stereo speaker in his room and started playing music all the time, the only thing that would give him ease.

That’s true for many dementia patients, according to several medical studies. Music therapy often helps maintain some brain functioning by stimulating old memories and emotion. That can help patients keep a sense of identity and continuity, the studies show.

Kelly recorded herself playing six of her father’s favorite hymns. She sat with him to play the CD for the first time.

“There was a lightness and clarity that came to his eyes,” she said. “His whole body calmed and he laid down and he relaxed.

“It made me cry. It made me so emotional to be able to give him a gift that mattered.”

She and her mother were on the phone every day the week that Kelly’s father died. Her mother urged her to stay in New York until he passed, knowing she’d need her daughter to help afterward with arrangements and getting through that first week without her husband.

Her dad died late on April 8, 2005. She played a scheduled church outreach program with her band the next night before going to Virginia to be with her family.

“I didn’t want to cancel,” Kelly said. “I remember thinking that it was so important to play for Dad, and that, maybe, for the first time in years, he’d actually get to ‘see’ me playing and singing!



A 1990 picture of Nashville nonprofit Music for Seniors executive director Liz Kelly, then 9, with her dad, John Chamberlain, at his parents' house. PROVIDED BY LIZ KELLY

“It was emotional at times, but I treasure the memories of that night. I knew I was honoring Dad and all he instilled in me, and I knew he’d have loved it if he could, indeed, see us.”

After more than 20 years of working for nonprofits, Kelly found another way to honor her father and what he’d instilled in her. She applied for the executive director position at Music for Seniors, which, among other things, provides music programs in all kinds of senior living communities, including nursing homes similar to the ones she and her father visited when she was a girl.

According to the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners, music therapy can help maintain cognitive function. Citing a study in *Alzheimer’s & Dementia: The Journal of the Alzheimer’s Association*, the council notes that “listening to familiar music can stimulate brain

regions linked to autobiographical memories and emotions, even in advanced dementia stages.”

Music for Seniors’ website is full of testimonials from those whose loved ones have benefited. Board member and volunteer Renee Garriss shared an anecdote about a man who hadn’t spoken in years. During a Christmas concert, she recalled in a Music for Seniors blog post, “he suddenly burst out laughing, started clapping, and called his daughter by name.”

“Music speaks to the soul,” Garriss said.

Last year, Music for Seniors provided 1,844 music programs in senior living centers and other programming.

“It felt like a way to honor the memory of my dad, and the way he cultivated my love of music and respect for my elders.”

Her mother also thinks it’s good for Kelly’s spirit.

“To be able to provide music for people, it’s a joy for Liz and good for her life,” Marshall said. “I’m excited for her to be where she is.”

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