

CFL

Michael Wessel

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Final Project – Feature Story

‘Concert For Life’ Helps to Fight Cancer With Music

GURNEE, Ill. – In 2000, Kate Pedersen was diagnosed with cancer. Her good friends, Betsy Barnich and Sarah Milewski, wanted to do something to support her. When they attended a small concert by pianist and fellow friend, Matt Wessel, an idea suddenly emerged.

Matt Wessel lost his father to cancer in 1997 when he was just 16 years old. Betsy and Sarah, knowing the story of Wessel’s father, asked him if he would perform a concert for the American Cancer Society (ACS) in honor of Kate. He quickly fell in love with the idea.

“With the memories of my father and the inspiration of Kate, the Concert for Life was born,” Wessel said.

The first Concert For Life was held in 2001 at St. Paul’s Church in Gurnee. It served as a chance to raise awareness of cancer and for the community to join hands in the fight against it. All proceeds would go to the ACS to fund programs such as cancer research, prevention education, and fundraising. Kate was able to attend and sat in the front pew. Smiling and laughing, people were blown away by her strength and how she wasn’t letting cancer take over her life. In the end, the concert raised \$6,000, but more importantly it raised hope.

The concert had been so successful that it soon became an annual event. Wessel has continued to be the main performer at each concert and feels honored to carry on the tradition.

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Wessel

“I always love playing at the Concert For Life because it reminds us that hope should never be lost,” Wessel said. “Kate and my father never gave up hope and neither should we.”

With the continual support of the community, the Concert For Life has continued to grow every year. Many communities outside of Gurnee have even begun holding their own Concerts For Life. To this day, the Concert For Life has raised over \$189,000 for the ACS to support the fight against cancer.

But with tradition comes change. On March 14, at St. Paul’s Church where this inspiring idea was born, Matt Wessel will be performing for the last time in the 10th annual Concert For Life. Having been the main performer for the past nine years, Wessel feels it is the right time.

“I have truly loved being the performer at these concerts,” Wessel said, “but I feel it’s time for someone new to help fight cancer with his or her music”

Wessel plans to attend all future Concerts For Life to show his hope in the fight against cancer. But while the concerts have grown to honor all of those who have died from cancer, Wessel says the Concert For Life will forever hold the legacy of Kate and the memories of his father.

“My father will always remain with me wherever I am playing, and Kate’s legacy will always be attached to the Concert For Life,” he said. “She inspired a tremendous fundraising idea that brings the community together and reminds us all that life is a precious gift.”

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