

WEB EXCLUSIVES

Raising Their Voices

BY LACEY MEYER

Young adults with cancer create a movement through music, and they're taking it on the road.

Music is a universal language. It's magical, with the power to pull people together with a gravitational force of feeling and understanding. It opens the doors to dialogue about the unspeakable. About cancer in an age group for which improvements in survival have been lacking for the past quarter century.

For adolescent and young adult cancer patients and survivors, music has become the portal to a new world: A world where they have peers. A world where they have educational information at their fingertips, flowing across the lines of the treble clef and into their hearts. A world where they can connect, communicate, cry, and celebrate. A world where music makes it all OK.

Matthew Zachary, 33, a concert pianist and composer and 11-year pediatric brain cancer survivor, says when things get out of control, people turn to music to make sense of the madness, and dealing with cancer shouldn't be different. "Music has affected social change since Elvis, so why not music? It makes it relevant, it makes it tangible, it makes it hip. What better medium to utilize and weaponize than music to make what it means to be a survivor relevant to those affected and those unaffected?"

Christine Baze, a singer-songwriter who was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2000, shares those strong feelings on music's ability to connect people and bring out emotion. "Most people are touched and affected by sound," says Baze, 38. "When you're talking about cancer, unfortunately that is also a universal experience. So when you combine music that moves people with a real thing, it's very powerful."

Say it in a Song

About 65,000 young adults in their 20s and 30s are diagnosed with cancer each

year, according to the Lance Armstrong Foundation. Now that adolescent and young adult cancer patients and survivors, ranging in age from 15 to 39, are on the cancer radar as a distinct community, a growing number of organizations have focused on this group. And they're using music to reach them.

[I'm Too Young For This](#), or i2y, founded by Zachary, is an organization he describes as one-stop-shops for adolescents and young adults that connect them with credible cancer survivorship tools, including social networks, peer support programs, and psychosocial resources. And at the root of everything he does is music.

i2y is a pioneer in offering a gateway to more than 50 resources for adolescents and young adult cancer patients and survivors. "Since young adult advocacy is so new in its spectrum, we are first to the scene to make it OK. It's the music. The music is the engagement. It's how you get their attention. It's how you make it OK and that's what builds our community," Zachary says.

He started out by distributing information brochures to 162 cancer centers in nine countries, but says those can be boring and become outdated. So he kicked off the i2y campaign with a benefit CD, which is a compilation of 21 original tracks composed by young adult musicians who have been touched by cancer. Zachary says he envisioned the CD to take the place of pamphlets and brochures in order to serve as a toolkit for cancer patients and survivors.

"It's such a better education strategy than boring pamphlets and inhuman brochures," Zachary says. "We want to give the CDs away and hope that people who receive them will be more comfortable with themselves and their diseases. When it touches you personally, I think it can have so much more impact in getting that person to take action."

Baze founded two organizations of her own focused on raising awareness about cervical cancer. The first, PopSmear, was intended to be a one-time benefit concert in her backyard in 2002 but with a little help from a friend in public relations, the concert had to relocate to a larger venue. The success of PopSmear led to [The Yellow Umbrella Tour](#), a series of concerts around North America featuring musicians like Ben Folds, The Fray, Duncan Sheik, and The Samples. The fourth annual Yellow Umbrella Tour made 36 stops across the country in 2006. The 2007 tour will stop in Columbus, Ohio, Raleigh, North Carolina, Dallas, San Francisco, and Boston.

Baze was inspired by music—specifically, the Cat Stevens soundtrack to the 1971 film *Harold and Maude*—to inspire others and actively spread awareness and educate young adults about cervical cancer and the human papillomavirus that causes it. According to the PopSmear website, which is loaded with HPV and cervical cancer-related statistics and facts, an estimated 80 percent of women will have contracted HPV by the time they turn 50, although only a handful of HPV types cause the 11,000 cases of cervical cancer diagnosed each year.

The Yellow Umbrella Tour comment section is painted with praise. People from around the globe rave about how much the music touched and informed them. A fan who heard the music on XM Satellite Radio said the music is "perfectly wonderful. And most of all, I have a better understanding of cervical cancer issues. What can I do to get a concert on the Big Island of Hawaii?"

The Sound of Success

Music has given young people a chance to have a voice and lets others know they aren't alone. "Most people don't want to talk about cancer or their cervix, and music opens up dialogue about it," Baze says. "Music opens the door for whatever message you want to give. I think it's all about being where you are and that's the thing that touches young people."

Music therapy is a clinical science, says Zachary. Indeed, research supports the hypothesis that listening to certain types of music can initiate relaxation, improve mood and appetite, and reduce anxiety and pain. Music can also assist physical therapy, improve energy levels, and encourage sleep.

"The nebulous nature of inspirations of the psychosocial impact varies based on the person," Zachary says, "and if it has an impact, I think that it's serving its purpose. You can't listen to the i2y CD and be relaxed, but the impact is that it brings inspiration to people and this is what they do with their lives. That's like me reading Lance Armstrong's book and being inspired."

Zachary says the organizations' websites and MySpace pages consistently attract feedback and comments, including one that said, "Your website saved my life." Another said, "My social worker gave me your postcard and now I'm starting my own social group."

This musical movement is expected to have a significant effect on the atmosphere for young cancer patients in the future. According to Zachary, the psychosocial needs of this younger population will be better served thanks to recent publicity and social change surrounding cancer. He compares it to the way HIV underwent a public image makeover from being a death sentence to being viewed as a chronic condition. There is still no cure for HIV/AIDs, just as there is no cure for cancer, but there is life after a diagnosis.

"We're celebrating the art of survivorship," Zachary says. "Your life is a work of art and cancer doesn't change that—it gives it a blank canvas. We need to share the grief and the fear and put it all out there and celebrate that."

"This is how we behave these days and I'm trying to capture that and build a community around creativity. Cancer-Palooza—how cool would that be!"