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KATE'S SONG: MUSIC DREW BRAIN-INJURED WOMAN BACK FROM THE BRINK

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There are those who believe that music has the power to heal.

There are those who doubt this.

The Callahans of West Hartford are not among the doubters.

Kate Callahan, 23, has just released her first CD. The disc is called "The Influence of Red," a reference to her striking, flaming red hair, which she likes to think of as a metaphor for her spirit --sort of wild and colorful and uncontainable. The CD contains 12 songs, each written, arranged and produced by Kate. She also sings and plays guitar on all the tracks.

It's a remarkable, even brilliant album, and she conceived it and created it entirely from her head.

Her head, which had already been through so much.

1. 'I Knew I Had Been Hurt.'

In the fall of 1996, Kate was a 19-year-old sophomore at Rutgers University in New Jersey, majoring in English and music. Like most 19-year-olds, she had no real idea what she wanted to do with her life. Her informal double major simply reflected that she liked to read and she liked to sing.

Some friends invited her to go skiing at Sugarbush in Warren, Vt., over the Thanksgiving holiday.

She hesitated at first, because she had been looking forward to spending the holiday break with her family - her mother, Marcia, father, Lee, and sister, Anna --at the family's trim West Hartford home near Wolcott Park.

But the trip wasn't going to be until Saturday, so she would at least get to have Thanksgiving dinner at home.

She said yes.

Saturday was a crisp, sunny day, a little cold for November, even in Vermont.

Kate made a couple of runs down an intermediate slope and went back up for one more run before lunch.

About halfway down the slope, she was struck from behind by a fast-moving skier. The collision threw her hard to the ground.

As in the slow-mo sensations of a dream, Kate perceived, as her head slammed into the hill and she tumbled and slid to a stop, that something bad had just happened to her.

"It was actually a funny double sensation," she says now. "On the one hand, I felt strangely peaceful and protected. But I was also instantly experiencing incredible pain that was nothing like anything I had ever felt or imagined. I knew I had been hurt."

Kate was taken down on a stretcher and driven by ambulance to a nearby hospital and examined.

The news seemed to be good. There were no broken bones. No visible injuries. She was released.

She and her friends headed home.

It was dark by the time the car pulled up to the Callahan house. Marcia was waiting, a little anxious but not panicked. Marcia had been given to understand on the phone that Kate had suffered, at worst, a nasty bump on the head when she hit the ground.

She was alarmed by the sight of her daughter as she staggered slowly and unsteadily into the house. Marcia had to help Kate up the stairs to her room.

Almost immediately, Kate's symptoms began to worsen. She started to vomit violently. She noticed that her sense of taste and smell were not working. She was having vision problems. Most worrisome of all, she seemed barely able to speak, and when she did, it was in a halting, inert monotone.

The next day, with no improvement, her parents drove her to St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, where she was given a

battery of tests, including a brain scan. It revealed bleeding in the frontal lobe of Kate's brain. More generally, the doctors said Kate had suffered traumatic brain injury, a loose collective diagnosis that can mean anything from relatively mild temporary impairment to chronic profound disability.

The doctors who conveyed this news to Marcia did not offer comforting reassurances.

"They tried to be as upbeat as they could and say that things might turn out OK, but they also made it clear this was a very serious situation," says Marcia. "But I could already tell that by the concern on their faces."

Their concern proved to be well founded.

2. 'I Just Couldn't Process The Sounds'

It took Kate and her family a few days to register the severity of what had happened.

But soon enough it became all too clear.

Kate Callahan, just days before a spirited teenager with a quick sense of humor and a lovely singing voice, was now a seriously damaged brain injury patient.

Instead of returning to Rutgers, she was now going to be taken by van each day to an Easter Seals rehabilitation facility in Windsor.

Instead of taking classes in modern poetry and Roman mythology (her favorites), she was going to be working on basic speaking and thinking, and how to put one foot in front of the other.

"The weird thing at first was I was too damaged to realize how damaged I was," Kate says. "But after a while going to Easter Seals, it dawned on me, even in my messed-up condition, how incapacitated I really was."

The physical part was difficult enough, but the mental loss was torment.

"The language thing, oh God, it was so awful," she says. "I still knew certain things, but now I couldn't name them or say them. Like I knew there was something that was big and white and cold inside, and you keep food in it, but what was it? What

was it?"

At first, the Callahans held to the hope that Kate's therapy might need to last only a month or so, and that she might be able to return to Rutgers for second semester. But this would not be the case.

In fact, in some respects, in the weeks and months following the accident she seemed to get worse, not better.

She was unable to recognize old friends who would call. She lost track of the days. She stayed in her room most of the time, and when she spoke it was without expression, as if from some faraway place.

Many of Kate's doctors and therapists and caregivers found it necessary to say to Lee and Marcia, in different ways, the one thing they didn't want to hear: You might never get your daughter back. At least, not the one you've known.

(Note: At the family's request, Kate's medical caregivers are not identified in this story. Nor is the identity of the young man who ran into her on the ski slope, in compliance with the terms of an out-of-court settlement that resulted from a lawsuit brought by the Callahans.)

Kate herself began to sense that she was not getting better, and that she might not ever get better. Already battling constant pain and humiliation and anger, Kate began to battle depression.

"There were certainly times when I thought of suicide, because I just couldn't imagine continuing like this. I was still in that condition where I wasn't really aware, but I was aware enough."

Marcia quit her job as an English teacher at a parochial school in Bristol to tend to her daughter full time. Frustrated by the lack of progress Kate was making, she sometimes tried her own therapies.

"One day my mom took me over to the nearby CVS, a store I had been in hundreds of times before," Kate says. "As a kind of exercise, she took me to the middle of one of the aisles and told me she wanted me to go find a tube of toothpaste and bring it up to the counter. Then she went to some other part of the store.

Suddenly there I was with this big store around me, and I felt I was being swallowed up by it. I mean, I knew there was toothpaste somewhere in there, but where? Was it near the cooler? Or over by the stationery? I just couldn't process how to go about finding it. So I just stood there, frozen. I started to cry, realizing that I was not able to do this simple thing, and knowing that I used to know how to do it. My mom eventually had to come back and rescue me. It was so sad."

Traumatic brain injury, or TBI, is broadly and simply defined as any brain injury that results from externally inflicted trauma, the most common of which are traffic accidents, falls, acts of violence and sports accidents. More than 300,000 incidents are reported each year, with roughly 50,000 deaths. The highest incidence is among 15-to 24-year-olds; indeed, it's the leading cause of long-term disability among children and young adults.

Maddeningly, the effects of TBI can be all over the lot. Physical disability of every description, emotional problems, memory loss, vision disorders, anxiety, loss of reasoning skills--almost any function associated with the human brain can become impaired.

Kate was demonstrating her share of impairments, but one was especially heartbreaking.

Beginning right after the accident and deepening in the days after, Kate found that she could no longer make, or even listen to, music. The Callahan household had always been a musical one, particularly since Lee, in addition to being a schoolteacher, is a well-known jazz pianist and teacher. From toddlerhood, Kate had always eagerly absorbed whatever tunes were wafting through the house. And by the time she reached high school, Kate had become an accomplished young musician.

She played the cello well, but most of all she sang.

Her sweet, light-vibrato soprano voice was one of the highlights of the 1994 Conard High School production of "Fiddler on the Roof." Kate played Tzeitel, one of the husband-seeking daughters of Tevye the milkman. Her big solo was "Matchmaker."

But now, hearing music, even faintly from another room, confused and frightened her. The sound was not merely incomprehensible, it felt menacing, somehow.

And she never, ever sang.

"Music became something to be feared and dreaded," she says. "I just couldn't process the sounds."

This was a special anguish for Lee, who does his piano teaching at the house. "I knew music had become a problem for Kate, and that really was awful for all of us to think about," he says. "But we kept hoping that she would come out of it."

But would she, in fact, ever come out of it?

To outsiders, the indicators seemed grim.

A family friend encountered Kate and her mother at the West Hartford Stop & Shop one afternoon more than a year after the accident. The friend was unprepared for what he saw: Kate moving uncertainly, leaning on a cane, talking in a lifeless monotone, wearing strange-looking corrective glasses with black half-discs covering the inner portion of the thick lenses.

After saying a few, barely audible words, she just wandered off down the cereal aisle, her head at an awkward tilt.

The family friend, recalling the last time he had seen her --it was her sparkling "Fiddler" performance -managed to hurry through the checkout lane and out to the parking lot before bursting into tears.

Some months later, Marcia saw something that made her, too, wonder whether her daughter would ever come out of it. She looked into Kate's room one afternoon and saw her daughter sitting on her bed, with her clothes arranged in neat little piles around her.

Kate explained to her mother, in the slow, matter-of-fact voice that was now hers, that she wanted her things to be given away to needy people.

Looking back on that day now, Kate says she thinks she was trying to "mourn" for the loss of her former self, and that by giving away her clothes, she might have been trying to establish a new self.

But at the time, Marcia had other thoughts. "For the first time I was really scared," says Marcia. "I thought that she was giving up."

3. 'It Was A G-Major Chord.'

It was now nearly two years since the accident. In despair that her daughter might be slipping away, Marcia decided to do something radical. She decided to take Kate off the long roster of medications that she had been on for most of those two years.

There were more than a half-dozen of these, including Paxil, an antidepressant, Trazadone, to help her sleep, and several others whose purpose she was never clear about.

Marcia asked Kate's various caregivers for their blessing in trying to wean her daughter off these drugs. She didn't get it. Most of them, in fact, scolded her and said it would be uncomfortable and even dangerous to take Kate off her "meds."

But with only a mother's instincts telling her Kate could never again be herself as long as she was chronically, in her words, "doped up," she went ahead.

The results were immediate and dramatic.

"It was absolutely hideous," Marcia says. "Those next 10 days were the worst of the entire ordeal."

Like a strung-out junkie, Kate began to go through intense withdrawal. She shook and sweated continuously, day and night. She screamed in agony. She was unable to eat or sleep. She begged her mother to let her resume taking the pills. At many moments, her mother came close to letting her do just that.

But little by little, the nightmare lifted. Two weeks or so later, the cloud that had enveloped Kate began to lift.

For the first time in two years, the Callahans began to feel a ray of hope. It was faint, but it was there.

Some other positive things began happening.

Kate started to respond encouragingly to the ministrations of a West Hartford massage therapist, Sue Chan, who spent many hours with Kate and who eventually became a friend as well as an "alternative" caregiver.

Kate began to take an interest in drawing and painting, which had not been a part of her life.

She began to speak more expressively and lucidly.

And one day, unthinkingly, Kate began to whistle.

"It sounds silly to say now, but I caught myself whistling this little tune, I think it was something I had made up myself. All of a sudden I realized, hey, I used to be someone who whistled a lot."

Later that day, Kate mentioned to her mother that she might like to try to take some kind of music lessons.

Not the cello, which she used to play, because the contrast with her former skills would seem too distressing. But perhaps something easier, that she could just try for the fun of it.

Like the guitar, maybe.

Almost before Kate had finished the sentence, Marcia ran to the newspaper and found the ad of a guitar teacher. His name was Jamie Sherwood and he taught from a studio in his home in the Elmwood section of town.

She called him on the spot and arranged for a lesson.

"I still can remember the first time she showed up," says Sherwood, who now lives in Southington.

"Kate was using her cane, and her mom had to carry the guitar case with one hand and hold her daughter's free hand with the other. There were some steps at that house you had to go down to get to my studio, and Kate almost had to crawl down these steps."

Sherwood had been teaching for years, and he enjoyed a wide-ranging career as a performer and recording artist.

But he was not a therapist.

He was not particularly aware of the rise of the use of music in the treatment of certain afflictions, including Alzheimer's disease, autism, depression and schizophrenia, not to mention, here and there, TBI. He had not read Mitchell Gaynor's "Sounds of Healing," an account of how a physician came to be convinced, through his work with a Tibetan monk, of music's restorative possibilities. Nor was he familiar with Carol Bush's 1995 study, "Healing, Imagery and Music," which suggests that, in some cases, music can be a powerful clinical device for a variety of afflictions, not just a diversion or a palliative.

Sherwood was a musician, though. And like most musicians--even the most cynical and blase of them--he did, and does, believe that music has the power to change people's lives.

His convictions on this point were quickly put to the test.

"First of all, her vision was so bad that Kate could barely see where her finger was landing on the string. And her two hands moved awkwardly to find their positions. I had never seen anybody struggle so hard just to do the simplest thing. It was like

she knew what she wanted to do but she couldn't make her body do it."

Kate looks back at that first lesson and shakes her head. "God, I was so bad, I just wanted to scream," she says. "I can't imagine why he didn't just boot me out the door and say, "Go home, you're beyond help."

In fact, Sherwood did harbor some thoughts along those very lines, at least at first.

"To be honest, yes, I was thinking this might not work. The first weeks of lessons were so frustrating to her, and to me as well. But I somehow just decided that I would treat her like any other student. I would make it clear that I expected her to succeed."

Kate would go home and try to practice, but she would be exhausted after five minutes because the physical effort and the mental concentration were too much for her.

But she kept going. She says she was too scared to quit --too scared of what failure would do to her delicate state of mind.

And then, as Sherwood recalls it, there came a breakthrough moment, maybe two months after the lessons had started.

"She came in, she sat down, and she played me her first chord. It was a G-major chord."

A G-major chord is one that many beginners can learn in minutes: the middle, index and ring fingers of the left hand are placed on their proper frets, and the other three strings are "open."

In the privacy of her room, Kate had struggled mightily and repeatedly to produce this simple chord.

She was determined to show her teacher that she could do it.

"She strummed that chord with a strength and a confidence that she hadn't shown before," Sherwood says.

"She looked up at me, and for the first time ever I saw her smile. I knew we had turned the corner."

Kate would now go home and practice for an hour at a time, then several hours.

Little by little, her hands found their way around the fingerboard.

Chords became phrases and phrases become songs.

"Something just began to click, it's the strangest sensation to try to put into words," Kate says. "It was like I could literally see the music before I played it. I saw it so clearly. I began to play whole songs, songs that I had known, like things by Tom Petty or the Beatles. Also I played things that Jamie gave me. I played constantly. I can't describe the feeling."

Kate began to arrive at her lessons by herself. The cane disappeared. The sense of humor returned. More songs were learned. And eventually, some original compositions were attempted.

How had this worked, exactly?

"I don't know," Kate says. "But I have to give Jamie all the credit. I don't know how he put up with me at the beginning. Or why. I think the one truly important thing was that he was never..."

For the only time in her hours of recalling her long ordeal, Kate abruptly stops and her eyes fill.

She takes a little time to compose herself.

"He was never condescending," she says.

4. 'Elation, Pure Elation'

In its smart blend of jazz and folk licks, Kate's new CD, "The Influence of Red," calls to mind the middle period albums of Joni Mitchell, the time of "Court and Spark" or "The Hissing of Summer Lawns." Some of the lonelier tunes, and there are several, give a feeling of what the young Leonard Cohen might have sounded like had he been a woman and a little more harmonically adventuresome.

Lee Callahan, who as a veteran performer has maneuvered his way around some pretty out-there changes over the years, plays piano on several of the tracks. He doesn't mind saying he was unprepared for the complexity of the music his daughter had created.

"The most astonishing part of it was that she seemed to have almost suddenly developed this very sophisticated sense of

chords and chord changes that I assure you she didn't get from me," Lee says. "I can't imagine where she got them. In fact, for the recording, I had to spend quite a lot of time transcribing the music off the demo track so that I could have some kind of road map of where the chords were going. She had them all in her head, but I found I couldn't do that without writing it all down."

Playing on the sessions with his daughter was an experience that Lee, a man of amiable understatement, describes as "elation, pure elation."

The CD was made last year in a studio in New York City, where Kate had moved for a time, in part, she says, just to prove to herself she could do it.

She did the classic 20-something-in-the-big-city thing: rented a cheap place, worked as a waitress days, composed and recorded and gigged at night.

Just in the past few weeks, she has moved, for the time being, back to town, into an apartment with some friends in West Hartford, over toward Newington.

She is no more certain about some things at 23 than she was at 19.

But she's certain now that music will be the thing that she does with her life. Before the accident, music had been an interest, a possibility. It's now a calling.

One of the most interesting tunes on the album is called "Breath of a Dream."

In it, a young woman imagines a new lover in bed with her:

"And I can't sleep 'cause
I'm so used to breathing alone,
And I can't speak 'cause you're
Breathing the breath of a dream,
And if I could sleep I'd dream
Of a friend who I trusted and I loved
And I could kiss, and I could kiss, and I could kiss, and I could kiss ...
Till I finally fell asleep."

The poignantly repeated phrase about kissing seems to suspend time, at least momentarily.

"I do think about time differently now," Kate says.

"Sometimes I think about whether this whole long experience could have been good for me in some way. I know that's a strange thought, but I can tell you that going through everything has ignited in me a sense that I have something inside me that I have to give and to express. I do feel like I have been given this second chance. I want to make the most of that. I want my music to inspire people to go out and do for themselves whatever it is that makes them whole."

The story has its dark patches.

Kate's senses of smell and taste are not really back, and probably never will be. She isn't sure whether she will ever get back to college and finish her degree, although she will take a step in that direction this semester, when she takes an evening course on the Psalms at St. Joseph College.

Last year, Marcia and Lee Callahan divorced. Marcia has moved to Maine; Lee remains in the West Hartford house.

As Kate points out, whose story doesn't have dark patches?

A couple of months ago, when her CD first came out, Kate played a gig at the Equator, a funky little juice bar in Manchester. A nice crowd showed up, including many old friends, but also some Equator regulars who didn't know Kate at all.

Kate radiated a quiet confidence from the low stage. She played some tunes from the new CD. The audience listened hard and applauded hard.

Out in the room, Marcia took a seat slightly off to one side. She had a little stack of Kate's CDs on the table in front of her, and from time to time somebody would quietly go over and buy one.

Marcia had a look on her face. It was essentially a smile, but there was something a little distant and otherworldly about it. All night she had that exact same look, whether Kate was telling a joke or singing a sad song.

It was, of course, the look of a mom who had gotten her daughter back.