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Transforming pain on the piano

On key: A Morgan woman composes to come to terms with the death of her husband

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MORGAN - Always there was music accompanying Loydene Hubbard Berg's life. Her mother played classics, sonatas and hymns on the violin, while her father blew jazzy dance tunes on the saxophone with his dance band, his harmonica tunes hung in the air while they rode up the mountain at the Beaver Mountain ski resort.

The oldest of six musical children, Berg was a child when she began learning to play the piano and the organ from her mother.

As a teenager, she quickly graduated to pounding out hymns in LDS Church services or for choir practice. For a time, she was so immersed in her piano playing that she planned to major in music at Utah State University.

In the 1980s, after she married another Aggie, Peter Berg, who joked that his own instrument was a CD player, Berg transformed her love of music into family ritual.

Like her mother before her, the Mountain Green housewife ended most days by playing the piano in the living room. Mormon hymns, mostly, or New Age instrumentals by Jim Brickman and David Lanz, her husband relaxing in an easy chair, her music lulling their children into sleep.

Berg stopped playing much because she was simply too busy - she and Peter both working full time, active in church and school, working together to raise their two kids, P.J. and Whitney.

Besides, maybe she didn't need music so much back then.

Berg turned to writing her own songs in 1996, the year she first faced down tragedy: the deaths of her father and younger sister to cancer.

Four years later, an incident turned the Utah woman back to spending hours at the keyboard. Sometimes playing the piano was the only time during the day she wasn't sobbing. Sometimes playing the piano was the only way she could express all the emotions that made her feel like an alien, a stranger, inside herself.

What happened next has been well reported by the Utah media.

Birthday celebration: April 27, 2000. A family gathering to celebrate a birthday at a Chevys Fresh Mex restaurant in Sandy. A 21-year-old ex-con, Quinn Robert Martinez, who was high on meth, waved a loaded gun and made threats before shooting five people. Restaurant manager Jason Rasmussen and Loydene's husband, 43-year-old Peter Berg, were killed.

After that - after two years of endless court hearings, after Martinez pleaded guilty to capital murder and was sentenced to life in prison, after counseling sessions and returning to work - Berg rediscovered music in a profound way.

She used music to turn grief, tragedy and guilt into faith.

All of that was the inspiration for her instrumental songs, which played on the stereo at Val's Flowers in

downtown Morgan at a Saturday open house.

Berg, 49, recorded "On Difficult Days," which contained instrumental arrangements of hymns, as a Christmas gift for her family last year. Now she has completed a second CD, "But If Not," which also includes several of her own original songs.

One friend described the music as haunting.

Signing CDs: Around noon, Berg sat at a round table in the corner, signing a stack of 20 CDs, talking about the cover, which was designed by her 22-year-old son, P.J., and her hopes that her 18-year-old daughter, Whitney, will record the vocals on one of her songs someday.

She doesn't expect to profit from her music, but hopes to make enough to pay back the \$6,000 in recording costs. More than that, she hopes to share the music that consoles her during the bad times.

When something as big and inexplicable as a random murder scars your life, Berg says, sometimes other people are afraid to talk to you, afraid of saying the wrong thing.

She said she hopes her music will serve as a bridge, a way to talk across tragedy and grief.

"We're in the same boat, you and I," confided an older widow with white cropped hair as she asked Berg to sign her CD.

"How are you holding up?" Berg asks with the vulnerability of a therapy veteran, putting aside her Sharpie pen to enfold the woman in a full-body hug.

"Hour by hour," the woman replies.

"You're on the hours? Sometimes I'm on the seconds."

Berg talks easily about her husband's memory, and what happened after he died, her own struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder, but she doesn't like the words "moving on."

That isn't what she has done. Besides, those words take her back to the night of the murder, standing outside the restaurant, when her husband's body was moved into the medical examiner's van when she wasn't watching.

Her CDs are about taking all the pieces of her old life - her love of her husband's fun-loving spirit, the life they all had together, even the knowledge that Peter died to turn the gunman's attention away from his loved ones - taking all of that and transforming it into something new.

"My music does different things for me on different days," says Berg, turning over the question slowly in her mind. "I'm processing stuff as I'm playing. I just have to keep playing everyday for myself. It's a necessity for me."

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