

DAVIDSON A.M.

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Singer winning struggle to get back on her feet

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BELLEVUE — Laura Dodd, 24, is hoping that she'll be dancing again soon.

For 12 years, the country music singer/songwriter has been battling a debilitating nerve condition known as chronic inflammatory demyelinating.

Dodd discovered she had the condition after having corrective foot surgery as a child. The anesthesia she was given can sometimes cause neurological problems, she said.

"I didn't have any reflexes in my arms and legs. I was very fatigued. And I couldn't run anymore," Dodd said, describing some of the symptoms.

"And before that, I was able to dance." Not long before the diagnosis, Dodd, now a Brentwood resident, had just performed in the musical *Oliver!* in her hometown of Gadsden, Ala.

"All of a sudden, I couldn't do the things I used to do. You really don't miss something until you lose it."

Dodd said she doesn't take those abilities for granted anymore. Dodd will speak about how she has overcome her condition during a presentation Wednesday at the Greater Nashville Unitarian Universalist Congregation. She will also give a performance during her visit.

"It's been a journey for me, good and bad," Dodd said. "But mostly the good outweighs the bad."

With help from her personal trainer, Don Cunningham, who works for Takes Two Fitness, and her doctor from North Carolina, Rashid Buttar, who specializes in alternative medicine, Dodd said she has



DODD

Getting there

Dodd will perform and give a guest lecture at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 26 at the Greater Nashville Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 374 Hicks Road.

The program is free. A social gathering with gourmet meal will begin at 6:30 p.m. for \$9 per person.

Child care will be available, and the church is handicap accessible. For reservations, call 673-7699.

been able to regain most of her abilities.

Because of Buttar, "I can feel my feet," she said.

"I am walking better than I have for the past eight years. And the tingling and numbness in my legs has gone away."

Dodd is on a strict high protein diet. She does not take any medications, only vitamins. "They help me increase my energy and use my food intake for the good of my body," she said.

Dodd uses a cane, but she's hoping that someday she will be able to abandon it, just as she did her walker.

Dodd said after her diagnosis, her doctor at the time told her she would probably be in a wheelchair by the time she was 18 and probably wouldn't live past 28.

"There has never been a wheelchair in sight for me, nor is there death," she said. "I feel more alive than I ever have."

"Emotionally, I have always been able to keep a positive attitude about it. I get frustrated like everybody, but I don't let it keep me down."

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Dodd attributes her successful recovery to God and to family.

"My mom has been my best friend; I couldn't have made it without her," she said.

And God, she added, has "been an important figure in my life. God always has a hand in our lives. He's always there to pick us up when we need Him."

Now, Dodd said she feels it is important to share with others the gifts that God has given her. "That's what He meant for me to do," she said.

Church member Bill Aurelius, whose daughter Lyn is responsible for arranging Dodd's visit, said he is eager to hear Dodd's story.

The theme of the lecture series, he said, is "The Importance of Being Human."

"We've had a lot of guest speakers, from poets to Iraqi citizens to classical musicians."

And Dodd's life story also fits in well with the theme, he said. "She's worked so hard to overcome her disability, we thought it would be good to have her."

Dodd said she feels her visit to the Greater Nashville Unitarian Universalist Congregation is helping her carry out her mission.

"It's about encouragement, inspiring others. We need hope in this life; that's what drives us," she said.

"I want more than anything in this world to be able to prove to others that no matter what anyone faces in life, they can achieve their dreams if they work hard at it. That's my motto that I live by, and it's been successful for me."

"If I help one person, I've done my job. I've done what I set out to do."

Musical meeting

Church member Lyn Aurelius, who is also special projects manager for the Nashville chapter of the Recording Academy, met Dodd when she stopped by the office one day to drop off an application and CD.

Dodd was hoping to be considered for the Nashville Grammy Showcase, which offers exposure for artists who do not yet have record contracts.

"She didn't make the cut. But she is very talented, and I always knew there would be a place for her talent," Aurelius said.

Because of that initial encounter, Dodd was asked to participate in the "Grammy Block Party" on May 11. "We just fell in love with her. She's charming, sweet and kind," Aurelius said.

Dodd's musical resume also includes performing as lead singer for four years in the Gadsden (Ala.) State Show Band and being a member of a group that opened concerts for trumpeter Maynard Ferguson's Nouveau Bop Jazz Orchestra and singer Sandy Patti.

Dodd currently has a Christian music video airing on *Positively GAC*. She will perform at Riverfest in her hometown in Gadsden on June 12.

In June, she will welcome troops home during a performance in Panama City. In August, she'll give a similar performance in Jacksonville, Fla.

Also in June, Dodd will participate in a festival in Washington, D.C., sponsored by VSA arts, an international arts organization for people with disabilities.

She will be performing on the Millennium Stage at the JFK Center for the Performing Arts this fall.

She also recently performed at a charity event for the Children's Miracle Network.

Dodd lives in Brentwood. ■