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THE LITTLE FESTIVAL WITH A BIG HEART

By David Morrison

Every picture tells a story and the one on this page is no exception. Yet behind this seemingly commonplace image of a young couple's wedding day bliss is a story of tragedy, great courage, fierce determination and rare selflessness. It is a story I find profoundly inspiring, and in truth one I can hardly think about without welling up.

James and Kim Wood (née Black) married in the bride's hometown of Campbell River on August 23, 2008. Thirty-three days later Wood, then aged 27, lay in a coma, fighting for his life in a Winnipeg hospital with his distraught new wife at his bedside. Following a Winnipeg performance by Wood's Vancouver-based rock band, The Hotel Lobbyists, their van came off the road outside Brandon, MB, in an accident that not only hospitalized Wood with critical injuries, but also took the life of the band's drummer, Mike Gurr.

In July 2007 my wife Susan and I attended the first Green Mountain Music Festival (GMMF), staged in an idyllic setting on

private land at the base of Mt. Benson in Nanaimo. We were attracted by acts aligned to our tastes, the excellent value, and the fact that it was a fundraising event for Cystic Fibrosis Canada (CFF). Organized by the Nanaimo-born and raised Wood, it proved to be the festival highlight of our summer. In its wake I referred to GMMF in a (currently shelved) book project by saying "if I could design my own festival, the model wouldn't fall too far short of this one."

Cystic fibrosis is a genetic disease that causes mucous to form in the lungs and digestive tract. Using airway clearance techniques sufferers must clear the mucous several times a day in order to prevent a build-up of bacteria that can cause bronchitis or pneumonia and subsequent lung damage. They must also take enzymes in order to assist with digestion. It is a high maintenance condition that for sufferers means a current life expectancy of just 35-38 years.

Pediatric nurse Kim Wood, 30 years-old this October, is a cystic fibrosis sufferer. It is this reality of their daily life together that prompted her then fiancé to do whatever he could to raise money towards the advancement of research into combating the disease.

"Kim's family are heavily into fundraising for cystic fibrosis," says Wood. "They inspired me to do my share, my part. And the one thing I know best is music, so what better way?" And so GMMF was born.

When news of The Hotel Lobbyists' tragic highway accident broke, it sent shockwaves reverberating through the music communities of Vancouver and Vancouver Island. Benefit events for Gurr's family and the newlyweds popped up everywhere. The incredible response was not only in fitting tribute to the late drummer, but indicative of the esteem in which Wood is held among his peers.

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"I was just so blown away by the support I received from the music community on the lower mainland and the Island," he says, seemingly still reeling from the reaction. "All the fundraisers that were done for me, and for Mike, just trying to help Kim and I get back on our feet...it was amazing."

Less than a year after the crash that by some miracle he survived, Wood was back at it, working himself into the ground at GMMF III. He had somehow managed to organize it during months of his agonizing rehabilitative slog back to a distant semblance of normality, focusing on it to aid his recovery. Many, including me, thought him crazy to even consider the possibility, but it is this indomitable spirit and drive to make a difference that have earned him the respect and admiration of so many. It is why all of the bands at Wood's festivals play for free, why the volunteers working them

in any capacity are unquestionably happy to help. On his rehabilitation team's strict orders, however, he was forced to take a rest last year, so the festival also took a break.

The Hotel Lobbyists' emotional final performance came at GMMF III, with the excellent Vancouver band Minto's Jimi Cuel occupying Gurr's drum stool. Lead singer-guitarist Wood wore a t-shirt bearing an image of his departed friend and band-mate, and at the climax of a powerful set Susan and I were not the only attendees in tears.

Three years after the accident Wood's rehabilitation continues. It has of course affected many areas of his and Kim's life, including how he is able to make a living. Before the crash Wood had been a substitute teacher for three years and loving it, but the extent of the brain injury he sustained means he is no longer able to teach. This realization devastated Wood for a couple of months, but in the manner all that know him have come

to expect he did not remain down for long. Wood is using his time constructively and creatively while plotting his next move on the long road back.

"I'm doing a lot of volunteer work and I'm going to start doing some landscaping," he reveals. "And I've been volunteering at an organization called VAMS - Vancouver Adapted Music Society - doing a lot of studio work recording disabled musicians. So I'm maybe interested in becoming a music therapist, but need to get a Bachelor of Music and learn the piano, so I have a lot of work to do!"

GMMF IV takes place in its usual location of 3116, Northwood Rd, Nanaimo, on Saturday July 16. Featuring twelve independent rock and roots-rock bands for a mere \$25, it will be as great a day out as

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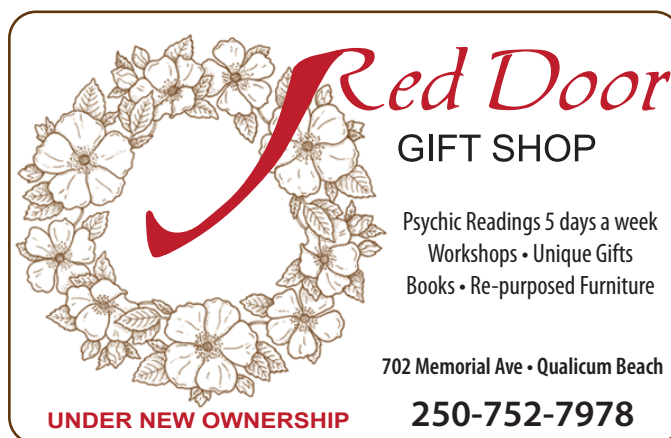
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the previous three festivals. Susan and I can attest to that. With an extraordinary \$15,000 raised for CFF to date, Wood is hoping for his biggest turnout and level of support to date, stating that it would be an "absolute dream" to raise \$10,000 at this year's event.

A stellar support cast of bands from Vancouver, Victoria and Nanaimo (including Minto once more) sets the scene for joint headliners Bison B.C. and Bend Sinister, but of particular note is the GMMF debut of Wood's new project, Megabear! (Exclamation point deliberate and warranted.) There is truly no keeping this man down!

Although every cent of profit goes to CFF, this festival still costs \$5K of Wood's own money to stage, so donations are most welcome. If any individual or company reading might be interested in helping in this respect, Wood would like to hear from you. (Contact details below. To this end he would like to publicly acknowledge the financial and logistical support of Bone Rattle Music (Vancouver), Delicados (Nanaimo), Coast Realty (Nanaimo), Shepard Trucking and Shiloh Lindsey).

It is for his lovely wife and fellow cystic fibrosis sufferers – staring daily at the near-certainty they will depart this world before reaching forty – that Wood toils as he does. Yet as inspiring a figure as he has become, it is Kim's humbling, matter-of-fact approach to her situation that in turn inspires him.

"Kim, honestly, is my hero, for how strong she has to be to deal with this," he says. "Her philosophy is 'it could always be worse', you know?" ~

For further information on Green Mountain Music Festival IV, including full line-up, ticket outlets and directions, please visit www.greenmountainmusicfestival.com. To enquire about making a donation to GMMF, even after it has occurred, please contact James Wood by email at swoodypants@hotmail.com. (Anyone not wishing to attend the festival but wanting to purchase a ticket in support of the cause is gratefully encouraged to do so.) To get involved or make a donation directly to Cystic Fibrosis Canada, please visit www.cysticfibrosis.ca, email info@cysticfibrosis.ca or telephone toll free on 1-800-378-2233.

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