

Melody of alms

By: Naila Francis The Intelligencer

It all began with a music video.

The day record-breaking flash floods ravaged parts of Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky last month, Mike Short Jr. (left) was just outside of Nashville making his first music video for the single “Who’s To Blame,” off of his debut album “Blame It On Me.”

The video featured a young dancer, Kayla Carolus, from Huntingdon, Pa., who was in town with her mother, Tammy Carolus, for the filming of another video as well.

When mother and daughter got back on the road that day, headed for home, it was only a call from their video producer — warning them about the severe flooding on the roadways — that kept them from driving into certain disaster.

The two remained in Nashville for another day before driving safely home, but the images they witnessed would haunt Tammy for days.

Wanting to help the flood victims, she came up with the idea for the Pennsylvania Helping Nashville benefit concert, a two-day tour crisscrossing the state with two performances — the first in Mount Union, Huntingdon County, on Saturday, with the second at Brownie’s 23 East in Ardmore today — that would raise money for the MusiCares Nashville Flood Relief Fund.

Connected with the Nashville Songwriters Association International during early brainstorming for the benefit, she was eventually put in touch with Debra Lee, the Philadelphia area coordinator of the Eastern Pennsylvania Chapter of NSAI, who helped to organize the Ardmore leg of the tour, along with Rick Denzien, her life and musical partner and founder of the Ambler-based record label Slot-1.

And so today, more than 21 area artists, including hit songwriter Craig Bickhardt (whose songs have been recorded by artists such as Ray Charles, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Trisha Yearwood), will take the Brownie’s stage performing everything from country and Americana to blues and pop for seven hours of nonstop music.

Here’s a look at two of the event’s organizers, who also will be performing today, as well as Short, a 2009 Pennridge High School graduate, who is a student at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

MIKE SHORT JR.

HOMETOWN: Ottsville

RECENT RELEASE: his Nashville-recorded debut “Blame It On Me”

SOUNDS LIKE: “A cross between Tim McGraw and Brad Paisley”

OTHER HATS: Songwriter

THE PATH TO MUSIC: Short was an athlete who was heavily into karate and mixed martial arts before he started having hip problems and needed surgery. “My parents took me to Nashville in April of 2006 where the surgery took place. The night before the surgery, we went to the Wild Horse Saloon for dinner and to watch a live band. I couldn’t take my eyes off of the stage,” he recalls. “I stood watching the band and it was at that moment I knew where I wanted to be and what I wanted to be doing. ... Since I was a little boy, all I ever listened to was country music. I knew I wanted to be a country singer, onstage and in front of everyone.”

INFLUENTIALLY SPEAKING: “My biggest musical influence would have to be Tim McGraw,” says Short, who won the Pennridge Idol contest his sophomore year in high school. “His songs all tell a story or a life experience. I have to feel that in a song to be able to relate to a song.”

THE RARE EXCEPTION: While Short tends to write from life experience, every now and then, the unexpected creeps into his lyrical vignettes. “The one song I had fun writing but can’t relate to at all is ‘Glass Bottles.’ It is a fun song about alcohol ruining a relationship,” he says. “Since I don’t drink, the first question everybody has for me is, ‘How did you write that song?’ It was just a rare mood kind of day, I guess.”

CROSSING BOUNDARIES: Short aims to make fans young and old alike with his music. “I don’t want Mike Short Jr. to ever be related to music that has to be censored for language content or slang,” he says. “That is not me. I offer stories of life and honesty in my songs, and I’m sure somewhere in there is forgiveness.”

NASHVILLE TIES: “The Nashville flood victims are in my community. I go to school in Murfreesboro, which is not far from downtown Nashville. I consider Nashville my second home. There were musicians who lost instruments, songwriters that lost their life’s work. There were everyday people just like you and I who are now homeless. No one ever wants to hear their neighborhood has been compromised and not want to try to do anything to help,” says Short. “I’m just not that way.”

DEBRA LEE / LYRA PROJECT

(ALSO FEATURING RICK DENZIEN)

HOMETOWN: Ambler by way of Quakertown

RECENT RELEASE: two award-winning singles, “Ordinary Girl” and “Goodbye Misery,” released in 2009

SOUNDS LIKE: “We’ve been called the current-day version of the Mamas & Papas. My voice also reminds people of Shawn Colvin.”

OTHER HATS: Philadelphia area coordinator for the regional chapter of NSAI-Eastern Pennsylvania; private piano and voice instructor; session musician

IN THE BEGINNING: Lee, whose mom played piano, can still recall her family getting a piano for the home when she was 4. “I remember the movers delivering it and feeling the excitement of sitting at the shiny new piano the first time. I picked out ‘Mary had a Little Lamb’ by ear,” she says. “My mom was impressed. She began teaching me before I started formal piano lessons.”

IT’S THE VOICE: Although she plays piano, Lee considers herself a vocalist first. “What I appreciate about the voice is that it’s always available,” she says. “You can take it with you anywhere without packing, lugging, dropping or worrying about it getting stolen.”

NASHVILLE TIES: “Several of the artists performing have friends, family and business associates who were directly affected by the flood, including Craig Bickhardt, who lived in Nashville for 17 years and still has family and friends there,” says Lee, of today’s benefit. “One of our ‘rock’ artists performing at the benefit spent his honeymoon in Nashville, so it’s not only the country artists, but also rockers who have an intimate, personal connection for doing this.”

A HELPING HAND: “What’s most important about the benefit is bringing the music community together in an effort to reach out and help others, along with music lovers and concerned people everywhere who genuinely care about helping in a very hands-on way,” says Lee. “Everyone is important for this benefit making a difference, whether performing or attending.”

RICK DENZIEN

HOMETOWN: Ambler via Buffalo, N.Y.

RECENT RELEASE: the single “TSAI,” from his forthcoming CD “Radiate”

SOUNDS LIKE: Often compared to Stone Gossard, Bruce Cockburn and Richard Marx. “Lyrically, it has been said that I’m in the deep end of the pool. I have a soft rock/AC kinda sound.”

OTHER HATS: recording engineer and producer; songwriting coaching and artist enrichment.

STRIKING IMPRESSION: Though Denzien credits Nick Arbore, his high school chorus teacher and vocal coach, as being a formative influence, he likes to joke about an even more impressive early inspiration. “One morning when getting ready for kindergarten, I was doing that twirling thing where you spin so fast and long that the room turns sideways. And just then, the giant upright grand rammed me in the forehead. BANG! Six stitches. I’m pretty sure that was the moment when the music hit me,” he says.

A DREAM COME TRUE: Denzien couldn’t have asked for a better introduction to being a recording engineer when a friend invited him to his first gig, a session with Steve Forbert, after he’d graduated from recording school — and he found himself at the studio of his dreams, A&R Recording in New York City. “I got to play the ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’ grand piano. I got to see Steve Gad’s ‘50 Ways To Leave Your Lover’ drum kit, and this was where (Peter, Paul and Mary) had recorded ‘1700’ from when I was a kid,” he says, noting the latter as one of his greatest musical influences.

NASHVILLE TIES: While Denzien’s first professional project was started in Nashville, his desire to help the flood victims stems from more personal origins. “My family home was once flooded, and that and other complications left us homeless. For about eight months, we lived in tents on the ground in a nearby camping park,” he says. “When school started, my sister and I would walk through the trees to the guard rail on the side of a country road to wait for a school bus.” His family was still there when the frigid Buffalo snows began in the fall, and finally got into a home just before Christmas. “I identify with others who have lost all their things and their home,” says Denzien. “All of us could be at the mercy of such a storm, and it would be good to know that someone would have my back in such an event.”

Pennsylvania Helping Nashville takes place today at Brownie’s 23 East, 23 E. Lancaster Ave., Ardmore. Show time: 2 to 9 p.m. Tickets: \$10; children, \$5 (guests can also tour country music legend Ronnie Milsap’s personal tour bus, a classic 1982 Silver Eagle Entertainer Coach owned by Tammy Carolus, for a donation). Information: 215-643-1313; www.slot-1.com/flood

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