

Bemidji Bluegrass Revival

How a love for God and for playing music gave the Burgoon family of Bemidji, Minnesota, a reason to sing



The Better Than Nothin' Family Band, from left: Shannon, Scott, Monica, Laura, and Kevin

AMY ADAIR

You'll find Monica Burgoon and her family in church most Sunday mornings. Just exactly what church that will be is another story. It might be in their hometown of Bemidji, Minnesota, or it might be on the other side of the world.

Over the past five years, God has taken the Burgoons from playing bluegrass music in their living room to doing concerts at local churches and even touring in Alaska. This summer the Burgoons, members of Bemidji's Evangelical Covenant Church, will take their Better Than Nothin' Family Band and their bluegrass gospel music all the way to Russia.

Monica, who grew up in Blackduck, Minnesota, has always loved music. At the age of eleven, she began plunking out songs on the family piano in her bedroom. "I learned how to play by ear," Monica says, "because my family couldn't afford private lessons."

While music was always one of Monica's passions, pursuing it as a career seemed unlikely. Instead Monica became a hostess at a local restaurant. But she didn't stop playing and listening to music. In 1999, she attended the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association festival with

her sister, Laura, and daughter Shannon. There, she says, "we just fell in love with the music."

Shannon, who was ten at the time, wanted to play the five-string banjo, so Monica bought her one. Monica picked up the six-string guitar, her sister Laura played the mandolin, and Shannon played the banjo. Before long, the trio began playing bluegrass gospel for local churches and nursing homes. The next year, Monica's husband, Scott, attended the bluegrass festival and started playing the washtub bass. Then their son, Kevin, who is fourteen, tried his hand at the Dobro, which is a guitar that you play flat on your lap, with a metal slide.

The newly formed band called themselves the Better Than Nothin' Family because "without Christ you are nothing," Monica says. "So since we have Christ we are better than nothing," she adds.

The bond of music was exactly what the family needed. Around the time they started the band, Scott was diagnosed with kidney failure.

"Disease can definitely pull a family apart," Monica says. "We've gone through some pretty hard times."

The doctors told the Burgoons that Scott's kidneys would eventually fail and he would need a transplant. While his kidneys are currently functioning around 30 percent and he struggles with

high blood pressure and fatigue, he is still able to work full-time as a sheet-metal worker.

"Sometimes it's not easy," Monica says. "But I find peace in knowing that I have the master physician in my corner. I believe we've gotten a lot closer to each other and to the Lord. This music has been a blessing. It's like God just reached down and said, 'You need this.' I just can't thank God enough."

It didn't take long for the Better Than Nothin' Family's concert schedule to grow. They have performed for countless churches, nursing homes, and weddings. They ask only for a freewill donation to cover travel costs.

"I can't tell you how much fun it is to sing with different people," Monica says. "It is so exciting."

Because they mostly play on the weekends, the Burgoons began to spend less and less time in their home church.

"It was hard at first," Monica says, "but our pastor said we're doing an outreach from this church. We're all one big family and we get to meet so many different members of it."

Monica admits that while being in a band with her family is fun, it's tough holding it all together. Depending on Shannon and Kevin's school workload, the family gets together to practice three or four times a week.

"We have to make time," Monica

says. "But when we have a bad practice, and people are grumpy, I just think to myself that other families are just sitting around watching TV and we're making music together."

Even with the pressure of everyday life and the stress of practicing and traveling, the family began praying that God would use their music for his glory.

"I said to the Lord, 'If there's something you really want us to do, show us,'" Monica says.

Soon afterwards, they were approached by Samaritan's Purse and asked to travel to Russia to share their bluegrass gospel. The family instantly knew that they wanted to go—the only problem was coming up with the \$6,000 in traveling expenses.

"We were sure God would supply the money," Monica said. Word quickly spread through the small town about the upcoming trip. Scott's employer donated four plane tickets. Another fan donated money for the family's pass-

ports. The Burgoon family also put on a bluegrass and gospel concert and raised a significant amount of money. But, even still with all of the generous gifts, they are approximately \$3,000 short.

"We figure we're still going to go," Monica says. "We have no doubts that

of concerts through July 4. (Scott will have to return home to work.)

Being able to perform in front of people is a true blessing for the Burgoon family. They just finished recording their second CD, *Better Than Nothin' Family Knee Deep in Revival*, on Snowy River Productions. It's sold in

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God wants us to go. It's a step in faith. I haven't always been able to step out in faith like this, but working through my husband's kidney disease has shown me that God is in control and he can handle anything."

The family is slated to leave for Russia on June 10. They will travel around the country playing bluegrass gospel music.

After a whirlwind trip around Russia, Monica, Laura, and the two kids will head to Alaska for another round

local Bemidji stores.

Monica isn't sure what the future of the band will be once they return from Russia.

"I'd love to go wherever God wants us to go," Monica says. "I don't know what path God has planned for us. We like to tell people that we're not anybody special, but God can use anybody. We just pray that the Lord will use our music to touch somebody's heart." □

Amy Adair is a freelance writer from Elmhurst, Illinois.

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