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1450 PORTLAND AVENUE, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK 14621
(716) 342-1700 ext. 426 Marilyn Yaniga

Catholic singer rocks in spite of spina bifida

By Elizabeth Bruns
Catholic News Service

INDIANAPOLIS — For Jimmy Ryser, an Indiana native whose rock 'n' roll has made him nationally known, life is a gift.

Ryser suffers from spina bifida, a congenital defect that leaves the spinal cord imperfectly closed so part of the spinal cord protrudes. This often results in neurological disorders, affecting various organs and nerve functions as the afflicted person ages.

Unlike 99 percent of those with spina bifida myelomeningocele, the most severe form of the disease, Ryser is still walking. "Pure luck," he said.

Ryser, a 30-year-old cradle Catholic, has endured 39 operations for spina bifida complications caused by pinched and irregularly functioning spinal nerves. He had his first operation nine days after he was born.

"When I was born, the doctors told my parents that I probably wouldn't walk or function like a normal child," Ryser told *The Criterion*, Indianapolis' archdiocesan newspaper. The doctors offered to let him die.

"My dad's faith kept the doctors from doing that," Ryser said. "He was so strong about believing that God had a plan for his kid. He insisted on surgery and when the doctors said they weren't going to do it, he flew the top neurosurgeon in to perform the surgery.

"Somebody was always holding my hand during surgery," he added. "Most of the time, I would sit up and pray Hail Marys all night."

Ryser caught fame with "Same Old Look," the hit single off his 1990 self-titled debut album. A violin prodigy who first picked up a guitar in his teens, he'll be featured playing fiddle on good friend John Cougar Mellencamp's next album.

Between the music industry and attending school — he's an Indiana University sophomore majoring in psychology — Ryser finds it difficult to take time out to care for his health.

"Sometime I find that school can be a bigger stress than recording an album," he said. "It's the downfall of being a perfectionist." Ryser is a straight-A student.

Father J. Joseph McNally, Ryser's childhood pastor at St. Bartholomew Parish in Columbus, refers to Ryser as a "very spiritual young man. Jim's life is faith-filled due to, in part, the immense physical suffering he endured."

The priest said Ryser knew he would succeed. "He persevered through many hard times — the pain that he went through was great."

"Growing up was kind of tough," Ryser said. He would miss weeks of school and his classmates would often make fun of him.

But as a child, Ryser always befriended the children who didn't have many friends. "He is an inspirational young man who works so hard," Father McNally said. "He has really been pulled up by his bootstraps."

This summer, Ryser will be opening concerts for Kansas, a band whose art-rock sound was most popular in the 1970s.

Group will focus on pregnancies among teenagers

BATH — An organization has formed to address the spread of teenage pregnancy in Steuben County.

"Zero Teen Pregnancy" is being sponsored by several community organizations, including St. Mary's Church, 32 E. Morris St. Volunteers provide detailed seminars on the scope of teen pregnancy in the county; the cost to individuals and the community and how county residents and groups can begin to address the problem.

For information on how to arrange a presentation, call 607/776-9631, ext. 4701, on weekdays. Or write to Zero Teen Pregnancy, c/o Steuben County Youth Bureau, 3 E. Pulteney Square, Bath, N.Y. 14810.

Hospital given \$25,000 donation

ELMIRA — The St. Joseph's Hospital Auxiliary presented a \$25,000 donation during St. Joseph's annual Volunteer and Auxiliary Awards dinner. The event took place June 7 at Elmira Country Club.

This money represents half of a \$50,000 pledge the auxiliary has made toward a new mobile care unit for St. Joseph's. The van will help provide health services for people in Elmira's outlying areas, particularly elderly residents and children who do not have easy access to health care.

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