

Personal Testimony: Sherri Youngward

Story by Christmas M. Beeler

Successful Musician Leaves Label to Serve in Worship



Sherri Youngward

Many know Sherri Youngward through her Christian music, but few know the struggles that brought her as a worshiper to the feet of Jesus.

Sherri started experimenting with drugs and alcohol in elementary school; by age 18, her addiction often got her into trouble. In high school, she met a Christian girl whose family reached out to her. Drawn to their peace and joy, she made excuses to come over. One night after taking her friend home, Sherri blacked out from alcohol and crashed into a hill. Though she should have been seriously injured, she wasn't. Her friend called the next morning and told Sherri that she and her mom had prayed for her that night. Sherri was deeply touched by their love and concern; it was a turning point for her. A little while later, Sherri cut class and found herself knocking on their front door.

Her friend's mom began to tell Sherri about having a relationship with Jesus. She said that Jesus loved her and that nothing could fill the hole inside like Jesus could. "By that time, I knew her and trusted her, so I listened. My insides were stirring—the hunger for answers, to be loved and known by someone. The hole was deepening as we were talking," Sherri recalled. The woman led Sherri in a simple, yet heartfelt prayer asking Jesus to come into her heart, take control of her life, and wash her clean. When Sherri opened her eyes, she felt changed.

"A deep sense that I was known and loved by God overwhelmed me. As big as the hole was inside, He came right in and filled it," she recounted. "I wanted to know everything about Him." She went to church, studied the Bible, joined Youth with a Mission (YWAM) for a year, and went on a mission trip to Belize.

In Belize, one of the girls played piano and asked Sherri to sing with her. "I didn't even know I could sing," she laughed. Though terrified, Sherri agreed to try. "As we sang together, I could see the effect that the music had on people. They were having a

moment in God's presence. Being a part of that gave me courage to push through my fear. It still does today." She started praying about being in a music ministry.

After leaving YWAM and moving to Washington State, Sherri struggled to stay strong without the constant structure and accountability. When she met some Christians who drank, Sherri thought that—being 21—she could start drinking responsibly. Her occasional drinking soon turned into full-fledged alcoholism. It destroyed her new marriage, her feeling of being free of sin, and her hope of serving God.

She was caught in a vicious, soul-devouring cycle. When she was sober, she felt like a failure and sometimes contemplated suicide; then she would crave a drink to escape the pain. She feared she had lost her chance to be God's child. "I didn't understand His grace," she recalled.

Brokenhearted, she entered rehab. During group discussion, Sherri sensed the Lord showing her: Even if she had just one drop of hope in Jesus left, that drop would be like an ocean to the other women there who were so thirsty. She read aloud 1 Corinthians 13 about unconditional love. The women were visibly touched, and Sherri realized God could still use her life if she would trust in Him.

At the end of rehab, she committed to staying sober for one year. She recalled, "I thought if I was still that miserable in a year, I would just give up." Sherri began attending CC Eastside in Bellevue, WA, where she stayed for 15 years until moving back to California. "The first time I went, the pastor said the name of Jesus several times. Each time, it was so comforting," she recalled. Now when she speaks in churches, Sherri always shares the hope of Christ. "I was a broken mess sitting in church; I was hurting but I wanted the Lord."

Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good



Sherri leads worship at the CC East Coast Pastors' Wives Retreat earlier this year.

Photo by Christmas M. Beeler

work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6

"God rebuilt me," Sherri said. She began writing songs with a friend at CC Eastside and playing regularly at a youth detention center. "I wrote some of my first songs for those kids," she said. "I knew I had one shot to paint a picture of Jesus—how beautiful He is, how forgiving and merciful."

Feeling that music was her most fruitful gift, Sherri made a demo of four songs and signed with a record label. In 1997, she released *Faces, Memories, Places*. Her second album was also well received. While she enjoyed working with the label, her passion grew to minister anywhere through worship—no matter how big or small the venue. On good terms, Sherri left the label to follow Christ wherever He led her. She has produced several independent albums and ministered at women's conferences, churches, and colleges in America and overseas, including several mission trips to Russia.

Her latest album, *Scripture Songs Volume 1*, sets biblical passages to music. "Scripture has been so powerful in my life," Sherri said. "When I was a new Christian, I would recite Psalm 1 over and over for relief from bad dreams or memories. I've always wanted to make a whole CD straight out of Scripture."

She enjoys serving God as a single woman and trusting Him as her provider: "There's nothing more fulfilling than being who He calls you to be." ☞