

Kentucky Just Us

By Susan Marquez

They're a family band, they work hard, and they have enjoyed success in their field. Kentucky Just Us is a prime example of how life can change when you least expect it. "I went to school to be a biology and chemistry teacher," laughs Terry O'Neal, the patriarch of the family. "I never dreamed of having a family band."

It all started with the family driving and singing. "We realized the kids had the natural ability to harmonize really well," says Terry. Both Terry and his wife, Shelane, play music. "I played keyboard, mostly in churches, and I was in a few Gospel groups when I was young. Shelane sings and plays the upright bass." But music wasn't something Terry and Shelane had much time for once children started coming, other than Terry teaching piano lessons from time to time. That all changed when the kids began singing together.

"They asked me if I'd help them, and I said I would, but they had to agree to sing any time or any place I asked them to. They agreed, and we started practicing. All we had was a guitar and the kids' voices."

On a cool evening in October 2014, on the way to a family outing to a local restaurant, Terry told the kids they'd have to sing for their supper. The kids laughed and went inside. They were just finishing up when Terry got up to go talk to their waitress. He asked if they could stand up and sing. The waitress said it would be fine, so Terry told the kids to get up and sing. "They were shaking like leaves, but they did a

very good job.” The manager heard the kids sing and invited them to come back and perform.

Since that time, the kids have learned to play instruments, including the fiddle, mandolin and banjo. John, the oldest of the group at age 19, plays mandolin and guitar. He also writes songs. Kacey is 18 and is a vocalist in addition to playing fiddle and writing songs. Jesse is 16 years old and plays banjo. Terry laughs as he describes Jesse as being the comedian of the group. “We never know what will come out of his mouth!” Jesse is also an accomplished songwriter. Caleb, the baby, is nine years old and plays mandolin and sings. He can also play the guitar and the mountain dulcimer. “He’s learned about 14 songs now, so he’s on stage a lot now,” Terry says.



In addition to playing with the band, John does the arrangements for each song while Kacey manages merchandise and social media. Shelane plays bass for the group, keeping them “in time and in line.” Terry plays keyboard and occasionally plays rhythm guitar. He also serves as the band’s manager, booking agent, van driver and sound man.

“We’ve been blessed,” says Terry. “When we first started, we

didn't know much about bluegrass or the music business. We played at a competition at a bluegrass festival in Kentucky and came across the Moron Brothers. They told us to talk to Dean Osborne. We went to tour the Hazard Community and Technical College's Kentucky School of Bluegrass and Traditional Music in Hyden, Kentucky." They enrolled and were instructed by Bobby Osborne, Dean Osborne, Virgil Bowlin and Scott Napier. "We were still playing on weekends and going to class during the week. We rented an apartment close by. It was difficult, but we made it work. It was worth it for the fantastic opportunities we had to study with such bluegrass greats." Kacey has also studied with legendary fiddle player Buddy Spicher and Jesse has studied with banjo extraordinaire Gary "Biscuit" Davis.

The band did 101 gigs last year and has played in venues such as the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Silver Dollar City in Branson, and several bluegrass festivals. They've been on television shows and were selected to be the first artists in residence of the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Their first album, The Land of Bluegrass, was released in 2015 and included a song by Shelane called The One Who Knows All Things. "It's a Gospel tune," says Terry. "We also have a Gospel tune on our second CD. People have been asking if we'll do an all-Gospel CD, so that's our next project.

Throughout it all, the kids have been homeschooled, which works well for their lifestyle. Their success has never gone to their heads. "We call the band Kentucky Just Us because we are from Kentucky, and I tell the kids all the time, we don't need to be like anyone else. We just need to be us."

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