

Graduate pursues country singing dream

By Kathryn Burke
The Goodland Star-News

From XPressos at Goodland High and singing at the county fair to big stages and a big single, Andra Townsend, 23, has stayed true to her dream of singing country music.

Townsend, daughter of Alan and Lynda Townsend and sister of Ross, 14, and Christa Smith, 29, has released the single "Hidden Heroes," a song about families left behind when soldiers head to war.

The single will be featured in a movie this fall "Answering the Call."

Townsend said she plans to head out on a tour of military bases to promote the song later this year.

The singer says she's only wavered slightly from her dream in junior high, when she thought of being a music teacher. That idea melted away the first time she took a stage, she said.

"I started performing," she said. "I started to like it a lot."

A 2001 Goodland High School graduate, Townsend soon was all around town, singing at barbecues, school functions and other local events.

She said in junior high, she started learning how to be a better singer. She went to solo competitions, taking advice from judges and learning as she went.

One year in junior high, she was the best female vocalist of the year, a title that earned her a spot on a plaque that still hangs in the school.

In high school, Townsend continued performing for judges and in school productions. She had the lead in the musical Guys and Dolls her senior year and she performed in the musicals all four years.

Townsend said she wasn't really serious about music in high school, but her experiences then helped expose her to different types of music.

After high school, she went on to Butler County Community College in El Dorado, where she tried out for a choir group, the Headliners.

"There I learned a lot about performing," she said.

The group required students to take a three-hour course that taught dancing, singing and acting.

"It's everything thrown together," she said. "It was a great group for me to be in."

She graduated from Butler with an associates degree in art after two years.

From there, Townsend moved to Wichita State University, where she majored in business management for a year and a half.

Now she is focused on her music career.

Before leaving for college, Townsend began work on the album that she's just completed. It took three years to complete.

She recorded cover songs in Goodland and slipped a copy of them to Eddie Kilgalon, then keyboardist of the band Ricochet. Kilgalon co-wrote George Strait's



Andra Townsend

song "One Night at a Time" and is now the keyboardist in Montgomery Gentry's road band.

Kilgalon liked what he heard and called Townsend two weeks later to get her signed up.

"He said 'You're coming to Nashville,'" she said.

Kilgalon sent Townsend 50 songs to look at before she headed to Nashville, where she recorded seven. Five of the songs on her album were written by Kilgalon.

The seven-song album was just a trial to see if it would sell.

When it was successful, Townsend said, they went back to record another five songs.

"To me, this is still my first album," she said.

Recording the songs, she said, took three days in the studio. She said recording in Nashville was fun, but hard work. She spent 16 hours rehearsing with studio musicians and then laying down the songs. The next two days they mastered and mixed the CD.

Townsend said she made sure the studio songs reflected her true voice so she could perform the tunes later.

She said she learned how to perform by studying others. A mixture of live and televised concerts have taught her how to react to an audience. She said it's sometimes tough because each stage is different.

"There's a lot of thinking that goes into it," she said.

She performs around Wichita at gigs that just come up, and has played in festivals and at local bars.

Song inspired by sister

Andra Townsend's full-length CD features the single "Hidden Heroes."

Townsend said she was inspired to write the song by her sister Christa's experiences as a military wife. Her brother-in-law, Doug Smith, is an Air Force major now in Iraq.

Townsend wrote the song with Eddie Kilgalon, keyboardist for Montgomery Gentry, in October.

"Hidden Heroes was the hardest song I ever recorded," she said. "It's such a special song to me."

Townsend said she worked hard to capture the right emotion in each line.

One by one they get on the plane
Two by two the tears fall again
Daddy, who could need you more than us?
Mommy, will you be back home for Christmas?
There's a cause they swore they'd defend
A little scared, no need to pretend
Not as much for themselves, you see
But for the loved ones in their families
Left alone

Chorus: The hidden heroes wait at home
Keep a close watch on the phone
Check their e-mail twice a day
For pictures from far away
They're on the home front standing true
For the red, white and blue
They're not soldiers, I suppose
But every day's a fight for the hidden heroes

The bills add up there's no end in sight
Heartbroke days and tear-filled nights
Take a look in your own back yard
Those who need the most are never hard to find
Chorus

She said they wrote the song to show another side of people affected by war. After countless songs about soldiers headed to war, she thought the people behind the scenes needed recognition.

"The families are sacrificing also," she said. "I kind of wanted to let people know what they do."

When thinking about the song, she said, she considered what she saw Christa do and decided a many people were probably going through the same things.

"There are a lot of families struggling," she said.

Townsend sang "Hidden Heroes" in Goodland in May at the funeral of Army Sgt. Derrick Lutters, who was killed in Iraq.

She said singing the song for the funeral made it even more emotional.

The single will be featured in an upcoming movie "Answering the Call," about the firefighters and police who responded to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. It set to come out this Sept. 11.

Townsend said she was glad to see the song used not only for military families but also as a tribute to those left behind after the attacks. She will attend the movie premiers in New York and Los Angeles and go through interviews.

"I think it'll be fun," said the Goodland High graduate. "This is my song. I'm really proud of it."

The song has been featured in *Country Weekly* magazine. The July 4 edition of called the song "powerful" and "touching."

"That was really cool," Townsend said.

She said she plans to tour later this year, singing "Hidden Heroes" at military bases throughout the country.

She said watching Christa deal with a husband at war touched her.

"It's hard to put yourself in her shoes," Townsend said.

After the song was done, she said, they ran it by Christa to get her opinion.

"She said 'I've never related to a song as much as this,'" Townsend said, adding her sister said it is word for word what military families go through.

The song has struck a chord with many others, as evidenced on the Hidden Heroes website.

"There's a lot of great stories on there," she said.

Townsend said people can post messages and tell stories of the ones left behind at war time.

People have told her the song captures what those left behind do when loved ones go to war.

The song is helping her CD gain recognition, and Townsend said part of the proceeds goes to help military families through the National Military Family Association.

Townsend's web site is at www.andracountry.com, and the National Military Family Association is at www.nmfa.org/site/PageServer.

A link to hear the "Hidden Heroes" song, a link to the message board and links to the above websites are available at www.hiddenheroes.us.

Stabber sentenced to nearly four years in prison

By Kathryn Burke
The Goodland Star-News

The scars on Rustin Leiker's chin, neck, chest and arm are sure to last longer than the prison sentence handed down last Thursday to the man who put them there.

Michael D. Whitaker, 35, Utah, was sentenced to 44 months in prison, roughly three years and eight months, in Sherman County District Court for stabbing Leiker last November.

Whitaker originally faced charges of attempted second-degree murder and aggravated assault of a law enforcement officer, but a plea agreement in May brought his charges down to aggravated battery, a level 4 person felony.

At his arraignment, Whitaker admitted that he stabbed Leiker after an altercation on Nov. 8. Reports indicate the stabbing was over a "female acquaintance."

That night, Leiker was given a blood transfusion here for knife wounds and then sent on St. Anthony Central Hospital in Denver in critical condition. Today he is healthy, but still carries scars from the attack.

After stabbing Leiker, Whitaker fled and was later found atop a roof at 706 W. Eighth. When police attempted to talk him down, he allegedly assaulted a state wildlife officer, Michael Hopper. He was shot by Hopper in the altercation.

Several wildlife officers were in court Thursday, along with Barbara Disney on behalf of Hopper.

Hopper sent a statement to Judge Jack Burr. Disney, speaking for Hopper, asked Burr to take the statement into consideration.

"I don't disagree with the feeling

of the law enforcement officers involved," Burr said, addressing Whitaker. "You put them in a situation untenable at the time."

Whitaker's parents were in court and his step-father, Barry Taylor, asked the judge for leniency.

He said Whitaker has tried to stay out of trouble for the past seven years.

"He's been doing real good up until he moved here," Taylor said.

Whitaker apologized for the crimes. "I would apologize to (Leiker) from the very bottom of my heart," he said.

Leiker was not in court, however.

During Whitaker's arraignment in May, Burr said depending on criminal history, the defendant was facing between 38 and 172 months in jail for a level 4 person felony.

In court Thursday, Whitaker's attorney, Scott Showalter, noted that the plea agreement asked for a 44-month sentence. Showalter asked the court to consider downward departure from sentencing guidelines.

Burr said the presentencing report placed Whitaker in criminal category A, the most serious, set aside for those who have been convicted of three or more person felonies. The schedule lists category I at the low end, for suspects having little or no criminal record.

In light of the report, Burr denied the request for a boot camp or probation sentence.

"I am of the opinion it does not fit

under these circumstances," he said. "I don't know what started the altercation, but it went from there to a situation where someone, including yourself, could have been killed."

Court records show Whitaker's criminal history starts with a misdemeanor in Texas in 1988 for unlawful use of a motor vehicle.

He was sentenced again the next year to two felonies in New Mexico for burglary and criminal damage and two misdemeanors for criminal trespass and phone harassment.

In 1992, he was convicted for four felonies, two counts of robbery with a deadly weapon, aggravated battery and kidnapping in New Mexico. He was sentenced for two person misdemeanors for aggravated battery in 1998.

Whitaker was convicted of resisting corrections

An engagement announcement for Misti Pottorff and Bryan Russell, in the Friday, July 29, issue of *The Goodland Star-News*, incorrectly said they are both from Goodland. They both live in Burlington, and she is originally from Burlington. Her parents live in Goodland. This was a reporting error.

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