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Band backs stem cell research

By KAREN BLISS -- For JAM! Music

Newfoundland Celtic-folk group The Irish Descendants hope to raise awareness for Canada's Inception Cord Blood Program and sell enough copies of their new "Southern Shore" album to be able to help families in need of the banking program. The Mississauga, ON-based facility stores stem cells found in the baby's umbilical chord for treatment of various diseases.

After recording the song "We Laughed," The Irish Descendants established Maxine's Hope, a fund in memory of the U.K.'s Maxine Edgington, a woman who co-wrote the track with British political folk singer Billy Bragg about her relationship with her daughter.

"I give you to our father's hand / I want you to remember that we laughed," is the final line.

Edgington, whose family has a history of cancer, including her grandmother, mother, aunts and sister, passed away from breast cancer in 2006.

"It's a song about cancer and survivors left behind," says The Irish Descendants frontman Con O'Brien. "It was also an opportunity to generate some royalties from the song for her daughter, which at the beginning was the first mind set for us, and then we thought, 'Well, maybe there's something else that we can do to do some good here.'"

O'Brien, whose son is 22 months old, says he would've taken advantage of the cord blood collection and banking had he known about it at the time.

The lifetime cost is roughly \$1125, plus G.S.T., couriers and storage, bringing the figure to about \$2000. Only about 21,000 samples are currently banked with the program, a small number considering Canada is a country of 33 million people. If "Southern Shore" goes gold, The Irish Descendants will be able to help fund cord blood storage for 20 to 25 families, according to the band's manager Michael Greggs.

"This stem cell research and the work that they do is able to [treat more than] 75 disorders," says O'Brien, including a wide range of cancers, genetic diseases, immune system deficiencies, and blood disorders.

"It's incredible the things they are able to do and I'm all for it. It's a little miracle that God has given us and people have done a lot of work to be able to figure it out. It's no different than taking insulin if you were a diabetic. All these new wonders certainly help mankind."

The Irish Descendants have sold about a half-million albums worldwide, since forming in 1990. O'Brien (lead vocals, guitar), Glenn Hiscock (fiddle, banjo, mandolin, vocals), Graham Wells (accordion, tin whistle, bodhran, vocals), Mike Hanrahan (banjo, bouzouki, mandolin, guitar, lead vocals), and Paul Hiscock (bass, vocals) were set to record their twelfth release when Greggs told them about the song.

Greggs, a Brit who lives in Toronto, was in the U.K. two years ago when he heard the song on BBC television while at a New Year's Eve party. He realized one of the players was Bragg. His friends couldn't believe he didn't know the song. It was a hit in the U.K. The single had debuted at number 11 on the U.K. pop chart, says Greggs, surpassing such names as Texas and the Eurythmics.

"The song stuck in my head," says Greggs. "I thought it would be a great song for The Irish Descendants, so when I got back to Canada, I started researching it, went through various managers, publishers, and got to Billy Bragg. It got to the point where I actually met up with Billy when he was in Toronto doing press and he gave me his blessing for the band to do the song. He knows who The Irish Descendants are because he holidays in Newfoundland."

Greggs says Bragg told him that the song came about through Rosetta Life, a British society that links the terminally ill with creative artists in order to express what they're going through. Bragg did a six-week songwriting course for some women at the Trimar Hospice in Weymouth, in southwest England. One was Edgington, who had had a double mastectomy hoping to avoid the family curse of breast cancer, but still got it.

"Maxine has a daughter, Jessica, who's 17 and her biggest concern was, if she died, she wanted Jessica to have very positive memories of her mother," Greggs recounts. "To that end, she'd had a professional photo shoot done of her and her daughter and Billy saw one of these photos and basically said, 'Why don't you base your song around the photograph?'"

According to Greggs, Bragg told him that they recorded the song as part of the workshop, after which he returned home to the north to continue writing his autobiography. Then, Edgington started phoning him, asking him to release the song to radio. One day, when the BBC asked Bragg to go on to do one of his infamous political diatribes, on a whim he asked if they'd ever done a show on terminal illness.

"Basically, the answer was, 'We've touched on it; we've had great phone response; we've never really done it in depth,'" relays Greggs, "So Billy's like, 'Have I got the woman for you.' He goes on the air with Maxine. They play the song. The rest is history. The song took off and went to No. 11 on the British charts."

Proceeds from the commercial single (released on Cooking Vinyl) went to Rosetta Life.

Greggs later recounted the story to O'Brien and Great Big Sea's Alan Doyle, who was producing "Southern Shore," and played them the song, a ballad sung from a woman's perspective by a singer listed only as Helena.

"Michael's enthusiasm about the song was something that you've got to think about at first, but I had to hear the song," says O'Brien. "For the type of band we are, the song is a little bit out of our vein in some respects, even though we have put our stamp on it with our sound, but it's always a little bit of a dicey situation when you go out of the vein of traditional Irish music. At the beginning, I had some misgivings about that part of it, but when I realized what the song was about, it really made that hit home."

"Another big factor was Billy Bragg," he adds. "I'm a big Billy Bragg fan over and he is a guy who visits Newfoundland a lot. He likes to holiday here and over the years, he's done a lot of concerts and he's been a bit of a folk hero here because he's visiting here and playing. So when I saw that Billy Bragg was involved with it and had co-written the song, it also made me

want to do it."

The Irish Descendants version is a duet with O'Brien and folk singer Karla Pilgrim and in that respect the lyric takes on the perspective of a parent singing to a child, not specifically a mother to a daughter.

While some radio stations are playing "Downtown Girl" off "Southern Shore" because it features Great Big Sea, the intended feature cut from the album is "We Laughed."

"That's the one I'm pushing," says Greggs, who learned of Inception from fundraiser Jeannie Butler, who arranged for a tour of the facility for him. "Inception immediately got what I wanted to do and, after going there, and seeing their work, the thing that got me was the guy [Brian Galligan] who was head of the lab there said, 'This is God's gift to us. We just don't realize it yet.'"

The Irish Descendants haven't toured yet behind "Southern Shore," but hope to in the fall and winter. With a 12th of the net sales from the album going to Maxine's Hope, O'Brien feels, "The amount of money that we're going to generate for this fund is not going to be a huge amount, but if we can make the people who come to our concerts or the people who buy the record and read the blurb the back of it, and make them aware of this facility, it's a good thing.

"I'm hoping that other people will join in and help out. There are families out there that have the genetic profile that requires this for the future to be able to fix a lot of these problems. This storage facility can take their [child's] blood and if they can't afford it, and we can help one child or 10 children, it's great."