Will Newman

ASHEVILLE Something incredible happened last summer in a big white house on top of a hill in a suburban South Asheville neighborhood.

It began in the heart of a 16-year-old boy with Asperger’s syndrome who loves his father beyond measure, and ended with a spectacular gift that may help change and even save the lives of countless people across the world.

How, you might ask, can a teen-ager with an autism-related disability change the world? Will Newman will tell you that anything is possible. If only you believe.

The story begins five years ago, when Will was 11 and traveled with his parents, Steve and Wendy Newman, to the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas.

Steve suffers from Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia, an incurable, fatal disease in which the patient produces an overabundance of white blood cells. It is treatable, and most people can live many productive years after diagnosis. Steve is in full remission after six months of chemotherapy, and is doing well.

In Houston, Will met his father’s physician, Dr. Michael Keating, a man Wendy describes as “a cherubic, jolly Australian who has committed his life to finding a cure for CLL.”

“When he walked into the examination room and Will and I met him for the first time, Dr. Keating, without hesitation, walked right over and gave Will and me a hug,” Wendy said.

Keating is president and CEO of CLLGlobal, the foundation that coordinates worldwide research, and “all of his nurses and staff reflect his optimism and warmth,” Wendy said.

It was at the cancer center in Houston that Will “got the full sense of the gravity of Steve’s illness,” Wendy said. “And he was indelibly impressed with the men and women doing this work to find a cure for his dad’s disease.”

It was also there that the seeds were planted in Will’s mind that he could find a way to help those researchers carry on their mission. Five years later, he did.

**Subhead**

Will Newman is an exceptional young man, both because of and in spite of Asperger’s, a syndrome on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. Those with Asperberger’s typically struggle with social awareness, peer interaction, and reading and interpreting the body language of others.

You’d never know, unless you were told, that Will has any sort of disability, and much of that has to do with the patient and gentle training his parents provided in his younger years. He is articulate, intelligent, charming, gracious and filled with a sweet and generous spirit that is undeniably genuine.

Will is an Eagle Scout, an honor student at Roberson High, an accomplished actor, a brown belt in karate, a level-six ballroom dancer and an award-winning photographer and writer.

Among those awards are four Gold Key and four Silver Key Scholastic Art Awards, the National American Visions Medal and a $1,000 Creativity and Citizenship Scholarship Award, a prestigious honor presented to only four students across the nation.

But those accomplishments almost pale against Will’s musical gifts, which have taken him to Carnegie Hall with his high school symphonic band and put him in the center of the local funk band “Jazz the Ripper,” along with performances at venues ranging from the Biltmore Estate to the Orange Peel to Bele Chere and Diana Wortham Theatre.

“It was tough when he was younger, for him and sometimes for us – we knew how much he needed to succeed socially, and we wanted so much to help, but there were no easy answers for any of us,” Wendy said.

Will often felt isolated “and even desperate, because he could not find a path to integrate with his peers,” she said. But then he found music.

“For all of the dysfunction in his life, Will seemed to have an intuitive grasp of artistic tools – he understood the subtleties of expression, not only in music, but in photography and writing as well,” his mother said.

“Often, AS kids have a gift, and Will’s is obviously his music – he plays five instruments and, when he was 4 years old, we discovered he had perfect pitch.”

**Subhead**

Will never forgot the visit to the cancer center in Houston, and his desire to find a way to help Keating and his staff find a cure for CLL. About a year ago, he nailed an idea – naturally, related to music.

Why not, he asked his parents, record a CD to raise money for CLLGlobal? Will had been already been creating his own jazz-influenced arrangements of traditional Christmas songs, and approached his dad about writing an original song to go on an album of holiday tunes.

As Will and Steve wrote that song, it became the centerpiece of the “Believe Again” project, which would evolve to include Stephanie Morgan of the powerhouse local indie band “Stephanie’s id,” along with a renowned music producer from New York City who has become like a family member to the Newmans, and Will’s longtime friend and musical colleague Paul Chelmis of the local band “Skinny Legs and All.”

Last June, all of them came together inside and in the woods around the family’s home in the Deerhaven community in South Asheville to create a masterpiece bathed in love and devotion, with Will at center stage in a magical triumph of music and video.

“Believe Again,” an EP with six cuts including the title song, is now on sale for $10; because Steve and Wendy are absorbing all costs of production, every penny of the CD sold directly through Will’s website will go to CLLGlobal.

There also is a video on the website featuring “Believe Again,” and it feels like a privilege to watch the mix of tenderness and euphoria exuding from this special young man who wants to do something to help his dad.

“We’ve raised $3,000 so far,” Will said proudly. “Our goal is $10,000, and we hope to surpass that, because with research, every dollar counts.”

Beyond the money, Will said, there was joy in collaborating with his father on the title song, the recording and the video.

“I’d written a few songs before ‘Believe Again,’ and my dad has always helped me with editing and getting the right words I want to express,” Will said. “When this project came along, we worked a lot on formatting the emotion we had between each other, and through that, our relationship got even stronger.

“I’m honored to call him my father,” Will said.

Steve says that honor goes both ways.

“Working with Will on this project was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life,” his dad said. “He is such an interesting fellow, full of passion and humor and song, and I am privileged to share it with him.”

**Subhead**

Will’s cohorts on “Believe Again” agree that it was a privilege to work with Will, as well as his parents.

“Will and his family are a riot – there are many strong-willed, charismatic and generous people living under that roof,” said Chelmis, producer of the video and now a freshman at Appalachian State University.

“Each time I went over there for a shoot, I ended up staying at least two hours past when I had planned, even though we had finished filming right on time,” Chelmis said. “Will is an easygoing, fun-loving dude with a good sense of humor, aside from being wildly successful at almost anything he attempts.”

Morgan, who is married to Stephanie’s id keyboardist Chuck Lichtenberger, met Will when he became a piano student of her husband years ago, and she eventually became his voice teacher. When Will asked, she happily agreed to take part in the “Believe Again” CD and video, noting with a grin that it was “fun to sing back-up to my student.”

“One thing I love about Will is his lack of fear – he’s a fearless guy, willing and open to learning anything, and he’s so unabashed in his performance, honing his skills right out in front everybody,” Morgan said. “And that’s a true mark of someone who’s going to go far, someone with that kind of bravery.”

Morgan, who called the Newmans “the most interesting people I know,” pointed to Steve and Wendy’s unfailing support of their son’s endeavors, for example Steve schlepping Will’s gear around to late-night gigs even during his less healthy moments.

“Will’s got a huge heart, loves his family so much, and is doing this thing for his dad – they’re just a great, great family,” Morgan said. “His parents are supportive of him so that he’s able to accomplish what he’s done, and he’s giving that back to his family – it’s just a beautiful circle.”

Anthony Paul Donelson, known in the New York City music world as “Tony D.,” met the Newmans a couple of years ago when they were in New York shopping for hardware and software that would allow Will to record at home.

They went to Sam Ash Music, which takes up almost an entire block in the heart of the theater district, and someone said, “You need to talk to Tony D.,” who handles professional sales for Sam Ash.

While the parents spoke with Tony, Will wandered off and began playing a keyboard.

“Tony was immediately aware of Will’s playing, and walked over and started talking to him,” Wendy said. “For the next hour, Steve and I were totally ignored – Will and Tony just completely connected.”

After they bought the equipment and were checking out, “I told Tony that he would have to come to our house to teach Will how to use what we had bought,” Wendy said. “Tony asked where we lived, and we said, ‘Asheville,’ and he said he knew all about Asheville and had always wanted to come here. Two months later he did, and now, of course, he wants to move here.”

Donelson, a music producer who has worked closely with the Dave Matthews Band and Lenny Kravitz, among many others, said it was a “phenomenal” experience working on the Believe Again project.

He has an unabashed adoration for the Newman family, and said that in addition to his appreciation for Will’s gifts, he was astonished at Morgan’s musical talents and Chelmis’ videography.

“I was so proud of everybody – it was such a team effort, one of the best things I’ve ever done (professionally),” Donelson said. “Sometimes I feel like, ‘this is the last time I ever want to do this,’ and then I do a project like this and I feel like, ‘Oh wow, yes, this is why I do this.’”

**Subhead**

Will Newman is a happy guy these days, uplifted by “Believe Again,” surrounded by a group of close and loyal friends, volunteering his Saturday afternoons to mentor younger musicians through the Youth At Jazz programs, shopping for colleges – including a recent visit to Vanderbilt University, and continuing his musical magic.

“I have good friends that I’m so happy to have, because it hasn’t always been like that – right now I could not be happier with the friends I have in school and in the community,” Will said.

Two of the “Jazz the Ripper” band mates are now in college, “but whenever all of us are in town, we hang out and play music,” he said.

Music remains his constant ally.

“When I’m playing piano and guitar and other instruments, that’s my escape from the world,” he said. “It can be very hard for me to cope with some things going on in the world, but when I sit down at the piano, it allows me to go into this amazing world of aesthetic creation, as I call it.”

And, finally, that gift of creation now has a tangible as well as aesthetic purpose – raising money for research to cure a terrible disease that is hurting his father.

“When I went to Houston, it was just amazing to see all these doctors and the work they do all for this one cause, to see that much charity and grace in one place, and it inspired me to want to help them out,” Will said.

“To be able to do this for a cause that will help out my family, and to do it through one of my passions – what an honor.”

(I’ll have a box with info on the CD, Will’s website and the CLLGlobal website)