

## About Jennifer Shaw...

Warm. Real. Funny. Intelligent. Engaging. These are some of the words people use to describe Jennifer Shaw. But her favorite? "Christ-follower, absolutely," she says. With a love for people and a heart to serve God, Jennifer wants nothing more than to point people toward the One who has changed everything in her own life.

Both a special needs and adoptive mom, Shaw is also a Telly Award-winning speaker, author, singer, songwriter, and five-time Billboard Top 40 artist who never thought she'd be doing what she's doing now. "It honestly never occurred to me," Jennifer said. "My background is entirely in classical music, and I was teaching at the university and singing with symphony. My plan was just to teach quietly somewhere and perform a little bit and raise my family. When I accepted the position of music director at a church, I never could have foreseen how things would change. In fact, I remember very clearly telling the lead pastor that I would do anything with music, but to never, ever ask me to speak from the stage because I wouldn't do it!"

But everything did change. Through devastating and unexpected circumstances, Jennifer's picture-perfect life came to a screeching halt with a series of life-changing events that she describes as her refining fire. "It taught me who I was. No one wants to go through hard times, but those life experiences are what taught me what was important. It taught me that life really is all about Jesus – knowing Him and making Him known. His faithfulness to me took my breath away, and it changed everything."

Jennifer began her musical ambitions early in life with an intense love for the piano, and after hearing her first Beethoven sonata, she was hooked on classical music. At an audition for a piano scholarship, she was urged by her choir director to also audition in voice, and much to Jennifer's surprise, ended up receiving the voice scholarship instead. She studied her craft in New York and received a Master's Degree in Vocal Performance from the Manhattan School of Music. Jennifer has performed in over forty shows in the theater, everything from Shakespeare and straight drama to musicals and children's theater.

After moving back home to Ohio, Jennifer began performing with the Columbus Symphony and later appeared at Carnegie Hall. She also became a Professor of Music for Cedarville University as well as the music director for her local church. Life for Jennifer and her husband and their two daughters seemed to be nearly perfect. But in 2003, Jennifer miscarried and began to bleed internally. Her husband rushed her to the hospital only to find out that Jennifer was dangerously close to death. "Realizing that I had nearly died put an entirely new spin on life for me. I started questioning things. Why are we here? What is the point? What is the purpose of life?"

While Jennifer was recuperating from this, she learned that her beloved father had been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, a fatal diagnosis for which there is no cure. The family was devastated as he began to deteriorate over the coming months. It was during this time that Jennifer began writing contemporary songs from the Scriptures she was finding comfort in. Shaw made them into an album as a Christmas present for her dad, never expecting anyone else to hear it.

Also during this time, Jennifer became pregnant again and gave birth to her son Toby the next year. But their brief joy turned to confusion and then fear as his behavior became increasingly more bizarre and extreme. Toby couldn't touch anything or be touched, was unable to eat, made no sounds except for crying all the time, and couldn't get water on himself or be messy without tears. Knowing she was losing her father, and unable to find answers for their son, Jennifer's charmed life seemed to be spinning out of control.

It was during a speech therapy session just after her father's death for a then two-year-old Toby that a therapist began to help the Shaws put the pieces together. "Toby qualified for an intensive speech program since he didn't have any sounds, and they also had an occupational therapist on staff," Jennifer recalls. "She asked us if we'd ever heard of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), and we said no. She started describing it and we were thinking, 'Check, check, check, that's our Toby.' SPD is a neurological disorder where the brain misinterprets sensory information. In Toby's case, he was misinterpreting touch. For example, when a drop of water fell on Toby's skin, rather than feeling wet, his brain told him it was burning him, and food felt like it was cutting his mouth. All touch was painful for Toby, and he was so overwhelmed and frightened that he was shutting down."

But giving the disorder a name did not take away the frightening and severe symptoms. "SPD is just unrelenting," says Jennifer. "He was never unafraid or happy. It was extremely intense, and he could never go with anyone else, so there was

no respite, even at night. Also, there was the fear of not knowing what would happen, not knowing if he would ever be 'okay' or if he would be able to live a normal life. You have to rethink the dreams you have for your child. We went from 'maybe he'll be a great this or that' to 'maybe he'll be able to walk on grass someday.' When you work for eight months every day just to get your child to eat a bite of bread, it changes your definition of success."

But as Toby continued his intensive therapy, the change became astonishing. "First it was words, then sentences. Then he began to allow us to touch him, then to go outside. A year later, when he was retested, they described his progress as miraculous, and told us repeatedly that it should not have been possible. Now Toby has been discharged from all his therapies for years, and is in school as a completely typical kid. We are amazed at what the Lord has done for Toby."

As the subtitle of her book, *Life Not Typical: How Special Needs Parenting Changed My Faith and My Song*, suggests, there were other dramatic shifts in Jennifer's life. Unexpectedly, her homegrown album of contemporary songs found success on the radio. She began pouring the lessons God was teaching her into heartfelt lyrics and music, giving her message a new voice with which she could reach a broader audience. Her quick radio success, garnering a #3 hit on the national charts with her CD entitled *Love Broke Through*, solidified her direction as a touring Christian artist. Her self-penned songs have made her a Top 40 Billboard artist, and have been used in various choir and chorale musical projects by Lifeway Christian Resources. She is also in demand as a speaker for outreach and women's events around the world, bringing her message of hope in difficult times and God's absolute faithfulness to audiences everywhere.

"We have learned that whether God's answer is 'Yes!' as it was with Toby, or whether it is 'No,' as it was with my dad, nothing changes the character of God," Jennifer says. "And if God is who He says He is, good, faithful, all-knowing, and always working for the good of those who love Him, then we can trust Him with whatever life is throwing at us, and know that He holds the bigger picture that we can't see."

This foundation on the truth of God's faithfulness has made Jennifer brave and passionate about sharing Christ with others in many ways. She now speaks around the country and around the world, and always shares the Gospel wherever she goes. "It is the most important thing you will ever hear on this earth, and I don't want anyone to miss the true life that comes with knowing Christ!"

Jennifer and her family have also become very passionate about the welfare of children. She works with Compassion International to fight poverty and sponsor children in need, and her newest CD entitled *Someday* features the theme song she wrote for Remember Nhu, a non-profit organization which fights child sex trafficking. Another song on the album called "Your Child" is Jennifer's heart-felt anthem for all special needs parents. The music video of the song debuted on Focus on the Family's "I Am Pro-Life" Facebook page to over 500,000 followers and has also been used by Joni Eareckson Tada's organization, Joni and Friends, a worldwide organization which serves people with disabilities. Jennifer's songs have become powerful reflections of the faith walk she has learned can be both treacherous and sweet.

Recently, the Shaws have felt God calling them to do more. "When we travel to all these places and work with these children in really hard situations, it can become overwhelming. It's easy to want to give up and think that the problem is too big and hopeless, so why do anything? But the truth is, we may not be able to save everyone, but we can save someone. And that is how God led us to adoption."

The Shaws recently added their new son, Noah, to the family. Noah is a nine year old boy from China with a very serious heart condition. "In our travels we had seen how few of the older children ever get adopted, especially if they are dealing with medical issues. We started to pray that God would show us who He had for us, and as soon as we saw Noah, it was so clear – he was to be our son!" Jennifer recalls. "We hope he will be able to have the heart surgery he needs this summer, and whether his life is short or long, we know that God has sent us such a blessing in Noah!"

Years of following the Lord through both good and hard times have taught Jennifer her most valued lessons. "Through it all, I learned that God is amazingly powerful," Jennifer continues, "and that He will use all things to the good of those who love Him, even when we can't see how that could be possible in the moment. I now understand that our purpose here is just to glorify Him, and that these are 'light and momentary troubles' as Paul wrote. When we were going through everything with Dad and my health, and then with Toby, I could trust God for His goodness and strength everyday. When we were terrified about Noah's health and transition to our family, He gave us peace and courage. He's never left me or forsaken me, and He's made me braver each day. I want everyone to know this Jesus who changed everything in my life."