Free to Forgive

FROM BOL INTERVIEW

Fame, fortune and forgiveness. In a game where one has to choose which word doesn't belong in a sequence, the seemingly obvious choice would be forgiveness. How often, though, it seems to be a reality, as story after story of those whose careers involve performing reveal a lifetime of pretending. Most often, the need to pretend grows out of pain caused by circumstances that require forgiveness.

This has certainly been true in the life of the performer known simply as Kelita, which is, in fact, her real name. Born to a cattle ranching family in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, she grew up in an environment far from the city and bright lights. Although her childhood memories include the simple pleasures of rural life and parents who were known and respected within their tight-knit community, things weren't really picture perfect. Before Kelita was of age to begin school, her brother who was ten years older began to abuse her sexually, a secret she never found the courage to share with anyone.

It may have been the beginning of wishing away reality and replacing it with an alternative fantasy. If so, it was only going to become more necessary.

When Kelita was just eleven years old, her mother felt unable to cope with her husband's alcoholism and growing emotional instability and left the farm, taking her children with her as she moved into the nearby city. It was a blow from which her father never recovered, and just six months later he committed suicide.

During the months that followed, as the family struggled to deal with all that had changed, Kelita's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and, despite two surgeries and numerous forms of treatment, she passed away less than four years later. In the last year of her life, Kelita's mother had remarried, believing that because the man was willing to adopt her two youngest children still living at home, it would provide some stability for them after she was gone. Shortly after her death, however, he remarried, bringing a new stepmother and her two children into the home their mother

Kelita (third from left) aged 4, on her horse Peanuts, along with her family

had bought when she moved into town; a home treasured by Kelita and her siblings as it held both their mother's things and memories.

Grappling with the altered reality of their lives, Kelita, her older brother and younger sister were already floundering when, just two years after the death of her mother, the brother who had abused Kelita died of a heroin overdose. Despite mixed feelings, it was the loss of a third family member in six years, and she began to doubt the trustworthiness of a God who would allow so much tragedy to occur in one family.

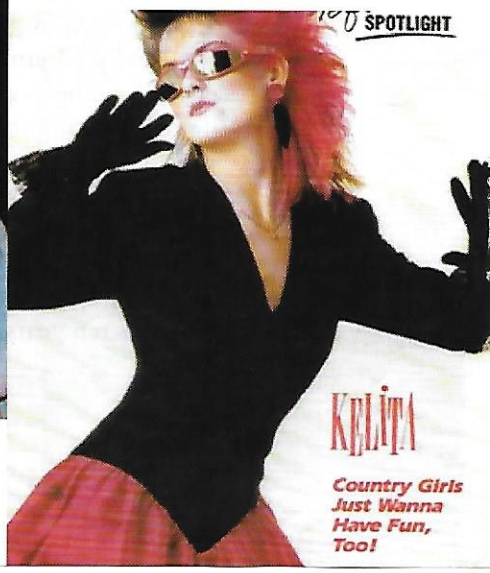
DREAM OF ESCAPE

The accumulating losses and difficulties made her dream of escape. At 18 years old, Kelita was accepted to the York University theatre program 2,200 miles away in Toronto and she was thrilled with the opportunity to transform herself. Perhaps now she would be able to leave behind all that threatened to overwhelm her; surely she would be able to make a new start where nobody knew the story of her life. As a young teen she had learned to create personas that suited her fancy rather than admit the tragic reality of her life. Now she would be in a situation where nobody knew about the circumstances of her existence.

The result of all that had happened in her life was a sense of shame, a shadow that followed her for as long as she could remember. The only thing larger in her memory was that, from earliest recollection, Kelita had believed she would be a star. When she was a very little girl, her mother dressed her like Shirley Temple and encouraged her to sing and dance along with television shows, entertaining family and friends. On her own, she would sing in the hayloft of their big barn, dreaming it was a stage, or in the glow of the yard light at night, pretending it was her spotlight.

When she was nine years old, she learned to play her grandmother's piano and, in the days following her father's death, she wrote her first song. Although her parents had attended a United Church in the city, they lived miles away and it wasn't always possible to be there every Sunday. During her illness, Kelita's

Early country music career with Ray Sawyer of musical group Dr. Hook



A poster from the early days of Kelita's country career

mother started going to an evangelical church, where Kelita's first experiences of performing Christian music took place. Her obvious talent led to her involvement in a Christian band and her first experience touring with a group.

Now finding herself far from home, attending university in a strange city, other interests were finding their way into her awareness. It wasn't long before she found that alcohol and drugs were able to make her forget all the memories that haunted her during the moments when she wasn't too busy to think. The memories of sexual abuse and the longing for the parents she had lost would surely now be forever gone from her life.

COUNTRY CAREER

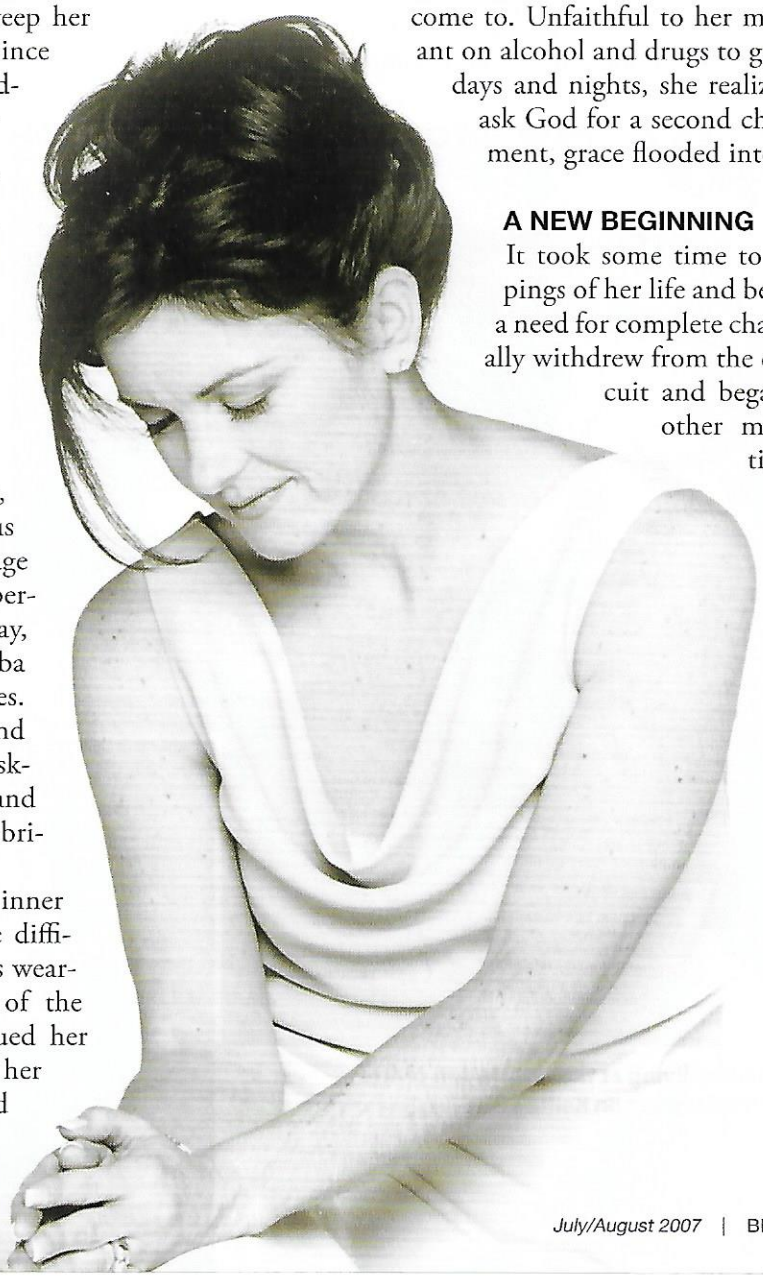
With the chance to leave it all behind and start over, Kelita was sure that nothing but good would lie ahead. Sure enough, within four months, she met a man who seemed to be the knight on a white horse who could sweep her away to a blissful existence. Since he, too, had an unhappy childhood, all they had in common drew them together and it was the beginning of a thirteen-year relationship. They were married after the third year of Kelita's four-year university program and set out to make a name for her in the country music world with her husband as manager.

It was a magical time, as Kelita gathered numerous awards and shared the stage with Canadian and other performers including Anne Murray, k.d.lang, Randy Travis, Reba McIntyre, and George Jones. As her star rose, Kelita found less and less need for God, basking instead in the approval and acceptance of audiences, celebrities and judges alike.

At the same time, her inner turmoil was becoming more difficult to dismiss. The glint was wearing off the shining armor of the white knight who had rescued her from the unhappy realm of her childhood, and she turned again to the numbing effects of drugs, booze, and illicit sex. In fact, her husband was manipulative, as well as emotionally and mentally abusive, and Kelita began to live in fear once again.

It was during this time that she became pregnant, and with no room for a baby in the lifestyle she was living, she chose to have an abortion. Despite having embraced moral values during her teenage years, she had long since abandoned such notions and didn't even give her decision a second.

It wasn't long, however, before she was to be reminded of the God with whom she once had a precious relationship. One night, on a long drive back to Toronto from halfway across the country, Kelita was driving their equipment van with her husband asleep on the back seat behind her when the vehicle spun out of control on black ice. Hanging upside down from her seat belt after the vehicle catapulted onto its roof in a ditch, Kelita had a brief moment of complete clarity as she contemplated all her life had come to. Unfaithful to her marriage vows, reliant on alcohol and drugs to get her through her days and nights, she realized it was time to ask God for a second chance. In that moment, grace flooded into her heart.



A NEW BEGINNING

It took some time to unravel the trappings of her life and begin anew. Sensing a need for complete change, Kelita gradually withdrew from the country music circuit and began pursuing some other musical opportunities. Following a divorce from her first husband, Kelita met a Christian musician while touring in the Middle East and married him after a very brief courtship. It was a magical time, and surrounded by Christian friends and musicians, she felt truly blessed. In just a short time, the happy couple

became parents to a baby boy, and it seemed that life couldn't get any better. What Kelita didn't realize was that the fairytale romance was just that—a fairytale!

A growing awareness of something that made her uneasy led Kelita to the discovery that her husband had become involved with someone she considered her friend. It was a desperately unhappy time that shook her in a way that made all that had gone before pale in comparison. She had been unaware of the affair but, from the time her son was very young, she had a sense that neither she nor their baby were central to her husband's attention. When disclosure and confession came four years later, it was almost a relief. However, the question was: "Is it possible to really forgive?"

Along with that question, what began to surface was the enormity of all the other things Kelita needed to forgive. People both living and dead who had failed to protect her, beginning with the abuse she had suffered as such a small child, and including all the other wrongs that couldn't be righted due to the circumstances of her childhood. At the same time, she began to see all the ways in which she needed to forgive herself. In a blinding flash, she recognized that only as we accept Christ's forgiveness for ourselves are we able to offer the same gift to those who wrong us.

The biggest hurdle of all was yet to be faced. Kelita became interested in the work of the local Crisis Pregnancy Centre and decided she would volunteer. While taking their counseling courses, she came face to face with the enormity of having taken the life of her own first child without a second thought. It was the hardest thing of all for which to forgive herself. Over time, however, the peace she had spent a lifetime seeking crept into her soul and, along with it, freedom from all need to pretend!

REACHING OUT TO OTHERS

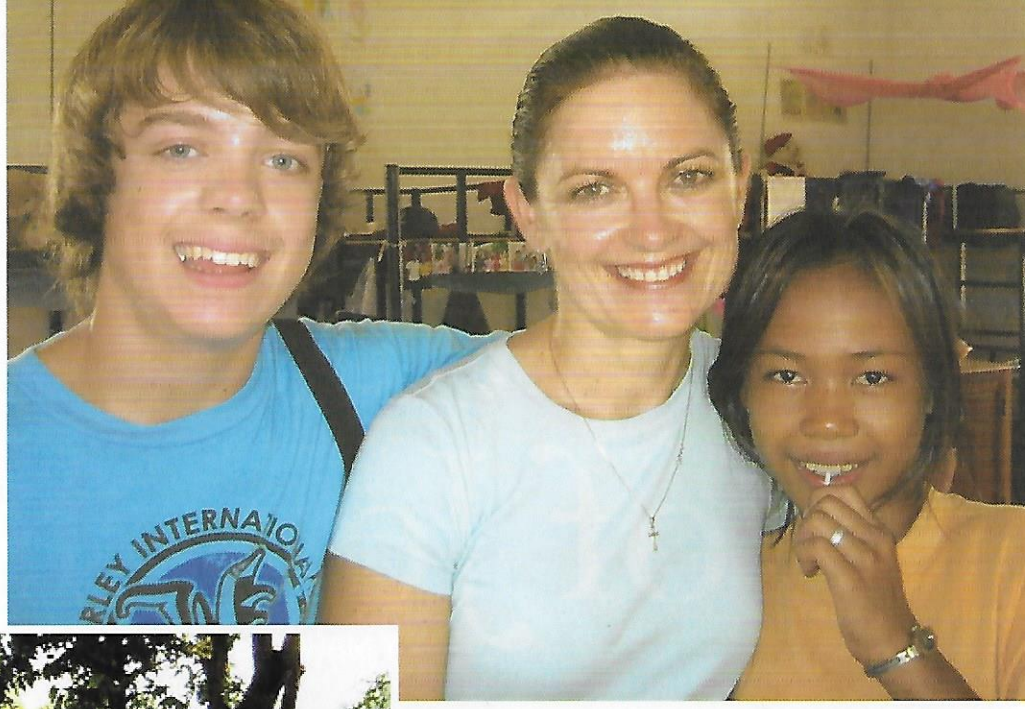
The years that have followed have brought many changes for Kelita. She and her husband Gordon now share frequent speaking engagements about their personal experience in working through the rebuilding of their relationship. They talk about both the story and the music that was birthed out of the pain, restoration and healing in their marriage. In fact, it was the catalyst for an entire CD, *Because of Love*. Their desire is that others will see that God can take something as damaged as a marriage threatened by betrayal and infidelity and bring grace, healing and forgiveness.

Gordon's honesty has had a special impact on men, encouraging them to open up and be real, and speaking volumes to those who have gone through similar circumstances but

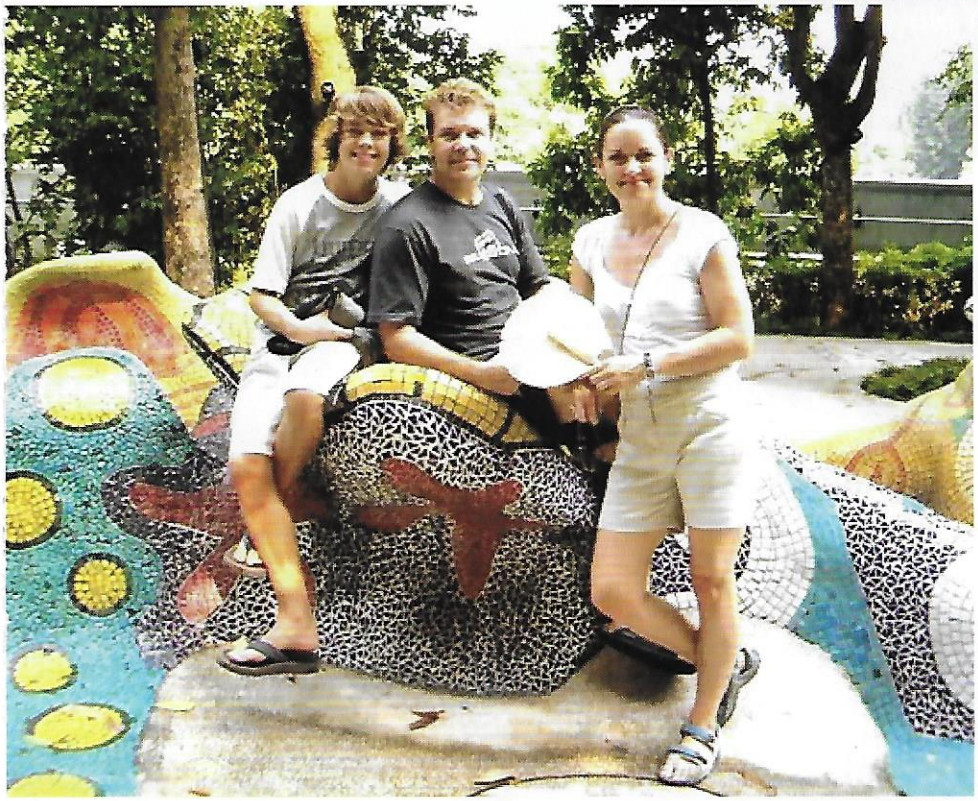
These Cambodian children living at the restoration centre had a profound impact on Kelita's life.

"To forgive is setting the captive free, and finding the captive was you."

Lewis B. Smedes



Kelita with Keldon and Charlene in Cambodia



Kelita with husband, Gord, and son, Keldon, in Cambodia

continue to live in shame. Kelita and her husband are amazed at the gratitude of people who open up to them at these events. Not everyone is ready to hear such an honest testimony but the couple has found great freedom in sharing what God has done in their lives and marriage.

In the late fall of 2006, Kelita watched a documentary about innocent children who were exploited in Cambodia's sex trade and it had a profound impact on her. Over the next few days, she used what she was feeling to write a new song, but the pain that remained in her heart moved her to see what more could be done. Through a series of connections, she met people who were helping to fund a new safe house and restoration centre for young children who were rescued from the brothels.

As she prayed about the situation, God placed in her heart a vision for a Christmas CD project titled *Heavenly Night*. She also felt she needed to visit Cambodia to experience the country and its people for herself. Nine months later Kelita, Gord, and their 14-year-old son Keldon were able to go there just in time for the first intake of girls into the new restoration centre. While she was there, Kelita was able to share her own story, sing and pray for them.

The girls she met were between the ages of 9 and 17; girls who were now safe and being given a place and a chance to heal. Seeing their lives rescued from the grip of abject misery and abuse inspired Kelita even more to proceed with the CD project, thinking of it as being about redeeming the night with God's hope and His love.

In the midst of it all, Kelita is still recognizing the liberating power of forgiveness. The effect on her own life is testimony to the fact that, as Lewis B. Smedes said, "To forgive is setting the captive free, and finding the captive was you." It is a freedom that nobody can take from you and perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give to ourselves! BOL