

KO students, staff rally behind ill teacher

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Students and staff at Keystone Oaks High School are rallying behind Shawn O'Donnell, a popular teacher who was diagnosed with inoperable colon cancer in May 2010.

The cancer has since metastasized to his liver and other parts of his body. The school is hosting a benefit concert for O'Donnell at 7 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 1 featuring the Justin Fabus Band, led by former Keystone Oaks student Justin Fabus. Admission to the concert is a \$5 donation and all the proceeds will benefit the O'Donnell family. The concert will be held in the auditorium at Keystone Oaks High School.

O'Donnell, 44, who is affectionately known as "O.D." by both students and staff has taught history, social studies and driver's education during his 20-year tenure at Keystone Oaks High School. He has also coached football and baseball for the district. O'Donnell lives in Cranberry Township with his wife, Tina, and their four

children, Nathan, 11, Alex, 8, Brayden, 3, and Mia, 17 months.

"It's been overwhelming," Tina O'Donnell said of the support from the Keystone Oaks staff and students. She added that the students and teachers support has been "awesome."

"They support him so much," she said, adding that Shawn has received many letters and cards from current and former students.

"He loves being a teacher," she continued. "One of the saddest things for me is that he's not going to be able to go back to teaching. He really loved the kids."

Mrs. O'Donnell said her husband always tried to set high standards for students to follow the right path. "He saw greatness in them," she said. O'Donnell has been absent from his teaching job since the middle of the last school year.

As of Sept. 26, O'Donnell was in the hospital because of an infection where a catheter was inserted to drain fluid from his liver. Mrs. O'Donnell said he was on antibiotics for the infection and was expected to be re-



Shawn and Tina O'Donnell with their children, Nathan, Alex, Brayden and Mia. Keystone Oaks High School is hosting a benefit concert for O'Donnell, who was diagnosed with colon cancer, at 7 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 1 featuring the Justin Fabus Band.

leased soon. She said depending on how he feels Oct. 1 they would try to come to the benefit concert. "It all depends on how he's doing."

Mrs. O'Donnell said dealing with her husband's cancer has been "sad and overwhelming," but added their kids keep her busy.

"My goal since the diagnosis was to do whatever possible to

keep the kids' lives as normal as possible."

Keystone Oaks High School English teacher Erin Wright worked with Justin Fabus to organize the benefit concert and also has a close connection with O'Donnell.

"He was my teacher," said Wright, who graduated from Keystone Oaks. "He's an amazing person."

"It was devastating," Wright said of when she found out about O'Donnell's cancer. "He always seemed energetic and athletic."

Fabus, who graduated from Keystone Oaks in 2005 and now lives in Scott Township, said he "jumped at the chance" to do something for O'Donnell.

SEE TEACHER PAGE A5

Teacher

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

Fabus said he had O'Donnell for social studies and also played football for him when O'Donnell was a coach.

"He's definitely one of the best teachers—if not the best—I've ever had," Fabus said. He said O'Donnell wouldn't just write off kids who weren't doing well in school, but would pinpoint the student's problem and come up with a way to solve it. "God definitely made him a teacher for a reason," Fabus added.

"It didn't matter who you were, O.D. taught on your level," Fabus said. He added that he credits O'Donnell for his success in the music business. "I'm where I am in my music career because of him," said Fabus, who currently has a single "Leaving Kind" playing on local country radio stations.

Fabus said he felt terrible when he learned O'Donnell was sick, but added, "If anyone in the world can beat it, it's him."

Keystone Oaks High School English teacher Jennifer Bogdanski said she has worked with Shawn O'Donnell since the 1996-97 school year. "He's my work husband," she joked.

"He's one of the most polite men I've ever met," Bogdanski said. "He's a great family man. He's all about his kids."

Bogdanski said O'Donnell is a "popular and well respected" teacher at Keystone Oaks.

Keystone Oaks High School senior Faith Domhoff said O'Donnell was very funny and "always

He's definitely one of the best teachers—if not the best—I've ever had.'

Justin Fabus,
former student of
Shawn O'Donnell

had jokes to say." She added that when she saw O'Donnell at school last year "It was the highlight of my day."

"He cared the most about what we did than any other teacher," said senior Noah DiAnna. DiAnna said he was kind of mad O'Donnell had cancer because "it was completely unexpected" because O'Donnell was generally a healthy person. "You didn't expect him to have anything wrong with him," DiAnna said.

"I did really bad my freshman year and he helped me get my grades up," said senior Tevin Dandridge. "He helped me out a lot." Dandridge added that O'Donnell talked to his grandmother to make sure everything was going well with him.

"He helped out even at home," Dandridge said. "It was a big surprise."

Scott Hagy, principal at Keystone Oaks High School, has worked with O'Donnell for 15 years, since he has been principal.

"He's unique in that he taught freshmen and seniors most of his career," Hagy said, adding it's not very common for teachers to teach those two grades.

Hagy added that freshmen are required to take history so O'Donnell had the opportunity to have a wide range of students in his class.

Hagy said with the seniors, O'Donnell had the opportunity to teach some at-risk kids.

"That's the group of kids that are constantly asking how he's doing," Hagy said, adding that O'Donnell was the kind of person who cared if the students received their high school diplomas.

"Being able to relate to all kids is a talent," Hagy said.

He added that it was "tragic" that O'Donnell found out about his cancer a few months after the birth of his fourth child.

"He's a very special person. It doesn't surprise me people want to do things to help him," Hagy said.

Along with the benefit concert by the Justin Fabus Band Oct. 1, Keystone Oaks High School also held other fundraisers during the week of Sept. 26. On Sept. 26 and 27, the girls' volleyball team sponsored a bake sale for the O'Donnell family.

Also, the proceeds from gate receipts at the Sept. 26 and 27 volleyball games benefitted the O'Donnell family.

The team is also selling T-shirts for \$10 and emerald green bracelets that read "No one fights alone" for \$2 to benefit the family.

This story, about Family Hospice patient Shawn O'Donnell, ran in *The Almanac* on 9/28/11.

O'Donnell was one of two Family Hospice patients profiled on WQED's end-of-life care Documentary "The Last Chapter."