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Country Christmas at Grace Tipling benefits Shepherds Cupboard next Saturday

By Brock Weir

Five years ago at this very time, country singer Sean Hogan had just a few more weeks to go in his treatment battling stage four cancer in his head and neck.

Completing his treatment rejuvenated his sense of gratitude and giving back, and Mr. Hogan ? and his musical cohorts ? are bringing this message to Shelburne next Saturday for a unique Christmas concert to benefit Shepherds Cupboard Food Bank.

The 13th Annual Canadian Country Christmas hits Grace Tipling Hall on Saturday, November 26 with a show time of 8 p.m. Featuring Mr. Hogan, along with Jamie Warren, Thomas Wade, and Jessie T., it promises a sampling of their country fare for the first half, with the second half turning over into a Christmas celebration.

?The show itself is not just Christmas music,? says Mr. Hogan, speaking to the Shelburne Free Press from Seaforth, where the group is set to perform the concert to raise money for a new roof for their public library. ?The first half is a blend of country roots music and many of the artists choose to perform their hits in that part of the show. The second part of the show is entirely Christmas music, with all of the artists on stage sharing stories of Christmas and performing Christmas music together. It is quite a lot of fun and one of the biggest reasons we keep doing the show every ear.

In response to famine in Ethiopia in 1984, Band Aid inspired people to think about their fellow man with the iconic track ?Do They Know Its Christmas?? ? and over 30 years on, this message still reverberates with Mr. Hogan. It was the moment in musical history that inspired Mr. Hogan to use his music to give back and in 2004 they started going out to communities playing their music, while giving something in return to their hosts.

In the process, they have raised nearly $200,000 for countless community groups across the country.

?Flash forward to 2011 and I was told I had stage four cancer,? says Mr. Hogan, a Sarnia native, now based out of British Columbia. ?I had 35 rounds of radiation to the head and neck, and chemo. It does something to be here five years later, rejuvenating a sense of gratitude to survive that kind of illness. I know a lot of people out there know people who have fought cancer as I have. There were people doing benefits for me at the time and that was really humbling.

?I have done shows for charities across Canada, with no exaggeration, from cancer research to hospital foundations, with tens of thousands of dollars raised for cancer research, and that was before I had cancer. There have been food banks, long-term care facilities, all kinds of services groups, and they are indispensable in communities. Food is quintessential and something we take for granted. It's not like we're living high on the hog like superstars just because we have had songs on the radio, and we can't take the life we had for granted. Food banks [like Shepherds Cupboard] are so great, and it is a great way to help out the community.?

Tickets for the November 26 show are on sale now at various location around Shelburne including Caravaggio IDA, Holmes Music, and at Town Hall.

?This is an opportunity to share the stories,? says Mr. Hogan. ?When people connect with a song on the radio, quite often they connect with the song live. We each have songs that are dear to our hearts, that maybe stem from connections with our family, but they are written in a universal way that is embraceable. 10 years before I had cancer, I had people come up to me and say, ?I have cancer, but your song Catalina Sunrise came out and it just made my day. When they started giving me chemo, I asked if I could listen to that song.' That was profound but over my head because I couldn't connect to that myself, but I could connect to the idea after 10 years had gone by, when I had cancer, and I saw how calming music could be when people put themselves into a song.

?It can be cathartic and people really feel the music. But, there is a lot of laughter at our shows. In the second half, there is a lot of camaraderie and we all chime in together. It's not just about playing song after song; there is an interaction with the audience and I think that is the biggest part of why people communally get together and perform music.?