

The Chapmans at home in Franklin, Tenn. (from left: Will Franklin, Stevey Joy, Steven, Caleb, Shaoey, Mary Beth and Emily).



"She was the perfect baby of the family," says Mary Beth.

MARIA SUE CHAPMAN
2003-2008

When gospel star Steven Curtis Chapman's youngest daughter was accidentally killed by an SUV driven by his son, the family faced a true test of faith. The Chapmans share their story of love, loss and healing **BY EILEEN FINAN**

With three biological children and two daughters adopted from China, Steven Curtis Chapman wasn't planning on adding to his family when he met a cherub-faced orphaned little girl while touring China in 2004. But the singer says he heard "a whisper from the heart of God," and a few months later, he and wife Mary Beth brought home Maria Sue. Exuberant and playful, "She was our laughter," says Steven.

On the evening of May 21 the Chapmans' lives were suddenly horribly shattered when Maria, 5, was accidentally struck and killed by an SUV driven by her brother Will Franklin, 17. "At first you don't even know if you can breathe. You

don't know if you are going to survive the grief and the deep, deep, deep sadness. You just want to lay down and die," says Steven, 45, a five-time Grammy winner and one of Christian music's biggest stars. "Every lyric I've ever written has been tested beyond what I ever imagined."

Steven and Mary Beth, 43, sat down with their three older children, Emily, 22, Caleb, 18, and Will, at their home in Franklin, Tenn., to remember Maria. Still working through his pain, Will says, "Faith is the only way I can tell myself she's okay. She's safe in the arms of Jesus and she's flyin' around. I cannot wait to see her again." Between tears and smiles—as daughters Shaoey, 9, and Stevey Joy, 5, periodically burst in from playing outside—Steven says, "We are moving forward in hope."

'We Will See Maria Again'

Photographs by JOHN CHIASSON

HAIR AND MAKEUP: ROBIN GEARY. INSET: COURTESY CHAPMAN FAMILY

“The only thing more frightening than walking through what we walked through with our faith would be to walk through this alone, cursing God” —STEVEN



Remembering MARIA

The family set up Maria's Miracle Fund through their charity Shaohannah's Hope (www.showhope.org) to provide financial help to families hoping to adopt. More than \$635,000 has been donated so far.



2006: Will, Emily and Caleb (with, from left, Maria, Stevey and Shaoey) say they all plan to adopt.



2007: "She brought so much joy to our family," Will says of Maria (right, with Stevey).



2004: When Steven met Maria in China.



2008: Maria (with Dad in a home video) "was playful," says Mary Beth.

The week before the tragedy was full of joy: Maria turned 5 and graduated from preschool. A few days later Emily got engaged. On the morning of May 21 Steven and Mary Beth were planning for Emily's October wedding; Maria was going to be a flower girl. Steven was writing music for the processional. Maria was up early as usual, but having misbehaved the night before, she faced a talk with Dad.

MARY BETH: On our refrigerator there are the three big ladybugs [for Shaoey, Stevey and Maria], each with three removable dots. If all three dots were gone by the end of the day, there

was trouble. That was all for Maria.

CALEB: She was always all out. She was either hilarious or . . .

EMILY: Mad as a hornet!

STEVEN: She'd be the only one who would lose all three dots! I had to be real firm that morning, but she ended up on my lap. And I prayed with her, telling her how much I loved her. Really, had she not lost her dots, we would have gotten up and rushed through the morning as we often do and not had that moment.

MARY BETH: Later the girls went to a playground [with a babysitter] for a few hours. So she had a great last day.

The three girls were playing on a swing set on the back lawn around 5 p.m. when Will returned home in his parents' Toyota Land Cruiser. As he parked, Maria dashed up to the car and, unseen, was struck. Will rushed to Maria and held her, crying out to his parents, who called 911 and performed CPR. Caleb held his anguished brother.

MARY BETH: I'm convinced little Maria was running to greet her brother, who she absolutely adored. It was an accident. It's an accident that happened to us. It happened to Will. It's nothing Will did.

STEVEN: As we drove out the driveway



With his sons in his band, Steven (here, in 2005) received a 7-min. standing ovation when he returned to the stage July 11. "I wasn't sure if I would curl up in fetal position and not want to sing," he says. "But walking onstage was huge."

to the hospital, I stopped the car and yelled to Will, "Your father and mother love you. You are in no way responsible for this. We're going to make it." I knew I might be losing one of my children, but I was determined to not lose two. The heart of my son was breaking in a way that was unimaginable.

EMILY: The questions came fast—"Why? Why Will? If God is love, this doesn't feel like love." But people told me—I don't remember it—I was praising God at the hospital that night. I did *not* want to be doing that. I was angry, but God shone through in a moment of my worst pain.

WILL: When I made it to the hospital, they told me she had passed away. I didn't know if I wanted to see her. I was nervous and scared and mad.

STEVEN: At one point I was screaming with everything I had in me, "God, where are you? How could you? We tried to honor you!" In the emergency room I was on top of Will, just covering him as he was in the deepest grief you could imagine. It was for him to know: "You are loved by this family."

CALEB: [After Maria passed away] we made a circle and held hands around her body and made an oath that for the rest of our lives we would honor

Maria through showing there is hope in really dark situations.

Reluctant to return home, the family stayed with friends for a week.

MARY BETH: At first my exact words were, "I can't ever go back home." But as the days go on, you realize that's crazy because there are so many sweet memories.



The May 24 memorial service for Maria, who was buried in her flower-girl dress, drew some 2,000 mourners.

STEVEN: First just Mary Beth and I came to get some clothes for the funeral, and that was brutally hard. We went in Maria's room and just fell apart and cried—our friends held us. But then I noticed that Maria had been working on a piece of art that morning. She had drawn a flower with six petals with only one colored in, and she had written the word "see." And I knew God was there. We really believe that Maria's petal was colored in for a reason—that she is the most alive of us all. We kind of feel like we have these little bread crumbs left by God and Maria, things that mark the trail and say, "Keep going. You're going in the right direction."

MARY BETH: [When we all returned home], the minute we hit the gravel driveway, it started pouring rain and it was like God was weeping with us.

STEVEN: He was reminding us that His heart was broken too.

MARY BETH: Then back by the playground where the girls were, there's a magnolia tree and there was one *huge* bloom on that tree, just there for us. Another bread crumb.

The family turned to therapy as well as their faith to find comfort.

MARY BETH: Immediately, I got Will and the two little girls and me to see a trauma counselor. I'm so proud of Will, allowing us to get him the help he needs. I can honestly say from the time the accident happened, I have nothing but love for Will. More love probably. And I think that is the miracle. That God can replace any confusion and any anger, because it's just not there. It doesn't mean it hasn't been hard. If I could take his pain away, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But we'll do the next best thing and walk with him.

WILL: One of the things that meant the most is how my family has told me that they love me more now than before the accident. Though it's hard for me to understand, I'm grateful.

MARY BETH: There's a lot of sadness. Shaoey saying that she could have stopped Maria, which is crazy. And Stevey—they were just joined at the hip. Watching this heartache, it's like

she's missing an appendage. We'll be in the Sonic drive-through, and they'll ask me a question about the accident and I answer it. I'm finding out it's good for them to process it that way.

CALEB: [The sorrow] comes in waves, and I don't think I'm ever 100 percent. I know something good is going to come of this, and I know Maria is okay. But it hurts. And there are definitely times when it hurts worse.

MARY BETH: There are days when we really do well, and you almost feel like you're disrespecting Maria. But I'm not fine. I'm broken and I would give *anything* to have my baby girl back. But that's not going to happen. So I wake up in the morning and make a choice. You can wallow in the deep end or you say, "God, show me what you want me to be about today and how can I honor you, and in turn honor Maria." When God promises not to give us more than we can handle, it's true.

STEVEN: I sat down at my computer last night, and I've got my three little girls on my desktop. I locked eyes with Maria and started to weep. I just missed her. But it was one of the

Maria's Drawing FOREVER LINKED

A few weeks after the family found Maria's last drawing—of a flower with one petal colored in and the word "see"—Mary Beth got it tattooed on her right wrist, along with Maria's name and the notation for the psalm "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Steven, Will and Caleb have also gotten tattoos in her honor. Says Mary Beth: "I want everybody to ask me about it."



first times the sweet was at least equal to the bitter. For so long, the bitter overpowered any sweetness of looking at her face again.

CALEB: A huge day for our family was the Fourth of July. It was one of the first days we were all in high spirits.

STEVEN: It felt like we *are* going to laugh again and rejoice again. It's always going to be with sadness, but that's okay. It's who we are now. I

want to be changed by this forever. We know we will see Maria again.

MARY BETH: And Emily kept her wedding date. Maria wouldn't have wanted them to postpone it. She would have been the first to go, "Are you kidding me? I've got the best seat—the view from the top!" So will it be a full-on sunshiny day? There's probably going to be a cloud. But then we'll have a big old time. Maria would want us to. ●

"You just look at [your children], and you have to handle it," says Mary Beth. "They need you."

