

Today's weather picture by: Sydney Vaughn, 10, Vancouver, Chinook Elementary School



DAVE BARRY

Godzilla never wears out welcome

Fifty years ago, it was 1954. (Research is the heart of journalism.)

Many important things happened in 1954. Dean Martin sang "That's Amore," and the French surrendered in Vietnam (these two events were probably unrelated). On TV, the new hit was "Lassie," a show about a really smart dog who belonged to a family with the IQ of mushrooms.

("What's Lassie trying to tell us?" "I don't know, although the last 29 consecutive times she acted like this, it was because Jeff fell into the well!" "Well, I'm baffled! What's wrong, girl?")

But for lasting cultural significance, the most important event of 1954 was the release, in Japan, of the first Godzilla movie, which in the American version was called "Godzilla, King of the Monsters." Although many people — you, for example — think of "Godzilla" as a cheesy monster movie, it is in fact a somber metaphor for the Atomic Age, showing what happens when the human race, in its arrogance, tampers with nature and unwittingly unleashes the terrible power of a man in a rubber suit destroying tiny unrealistic props.

Don't get me wrong: I love Godzilla, in a manly heterosexual way. As a boy growing up in the 1950s I saw all the Japanese monster movies I could, including "Mothra," "Rodan," "The Mysterians" and "Ben-Hur." But Godzilla, truly, was the king. He was Elvis. This is why, in honor of his 50th birthday, I recently decided to watch the original "Godzilla" movie again. And if you think that, after all these years, it has lost something, I have news for you: It's funnier than ever.

This is especially true of the American version, which had Raymond Burr edited into it. Burr plays a reporter named Steve Martin, whose primary function is to frown with concern at various scenes that he can't actually be in because he wasn't around when they were filmed. You see Godzilla stomping around in his rubber suit; then you see Japanese people fleeing in panic; then you see Steve looking concerned, as if he's thinking: "How come the sky color is completely different in the scenes that show me?"

After he has spent a while watching Tokyo being obliterated by a 400-foot-tall monster with radioactive breath, Steve's "nose for news" starts twitching, and he takes time out from frowning to write an actual story. This leads to the following telephone exchange between Steve and his editor:

Editor: Now let's have it, Steve. What about this monster story of yours?

Steve: Well, it's big and terrible, more frightening than I ever thought possible.

Editor: You realize your story's front page all over the country. We want to know what's being done about this monster.

Steve: Well, here's your headline: "Security Decides to Use Depth Bomb on Godzilla."

(As a veteran of 30 years in the newspaper business, I can attest that this is a totally accurate depiction of the way reporters and editors talk to each other, the only difference being that, in real life, the edi-

BARRY, page D3

She hopes no one feels sorry for her. At concerts, especially, she wants to be just another girl in the crowd.

For her, it's all about the MUSIC



With help from nurse and friend Cynthia Chimienti, left, Kelly Spicer enjoys a recent performance by country star Dierks Bentley at the Clark County Fair.

With every step along the way difficult, it takes determination to get to a show

Sparkle spray makes Kelly Spicer's face glimmer as she frantically fusses with her hair.

Her outfit was chosen weeks ago: the "Is it chicken or tuna?" T-shirt, Lucky brand jeans and pink Ugg boots. Her makeup looks perfect, light blue mascara bringing out the color in her eyes. But even after a couple of hours of prepping — or, more accurately, directing the prep — Kelly still has her hair bunched in rubber bands because she can't get it to look exactly the way she wants.

More hairspray, she tells her mother, Pat, who dutifully applies a couple of shots. More, Kelly

Story by Brett Oppegaard
Photos by Troy Wayrynen of The Columbian

insists, as Pat sprays and sprays. When Pat finally releases the scrunches of blonde, the strands no longer fall straight and flat. The treatment has worked, with kinks interrupted by tufts tossed into waves.

Kelly and Pat inspect the youthful image in the mirror, and Pat beams, "Look at that. You're gorgeous." Kelly, though, wants to see her shoulder-length hair tucked behind her ears. Pat tries

to talk her out of it, but Kelly decides she wants the hair behind the ears anyway. Now she's ready for pop diva Jessica Simpson.

Nothing for granted

Going to a concert gives the 21-year-old from Vancouver a rare opportunity to be just like everyone else, despite her having muscular dystrophy. It's a chance to transcend the limitations of her life.

When people huddle together to listen, she says, it's all about the music and sharing something magnificently temporal. Something that can never be repeated again.

KELLY, page D6

Did you know?

■ The Amphitheater at Clark County keeps handicapped-accessible seats available until one hour before each show time, after which they are sold to the public (only if no other seats in the venue are vacant). Each wheelchair spot is supplemented by places for companions to sit, and there also are areas within the amphitheater for people who are larger than normal size, visually impaired or deaf. At Fleetwood Mac, for example, one fan requested and used a signed interpreter throughout the show. More information about the venue's accessibility is available through the guest services office, 360-816-7000.

■ More than 1 million Americans have some form of neuromuscular disease, such as muscular dystrophy. There is no specific treatment for any of those, but, in some cases, respiratory and physical therapy can improve the quality of life.

"Kelly would not let herself be thought of as different. She was going to do what everyone else was doing."

Kelly's mother, Pat

"Even though she's been unable to do things physically, she's been very good at finding things to keep her going."

Dave, Kelly's father

your Guide:



Japan's Robo-One competition is all about high-tech fun /D3



Television: VH1's 'Soundtrack to War' combines music, war footage /D13

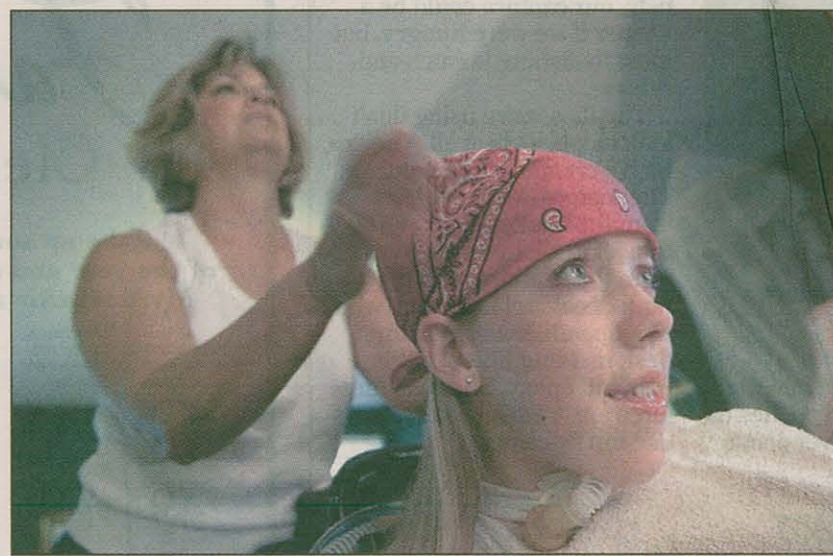
Coming Monday:

Vancouver Community Theater stages its first musical /D1

"A couple inches taller
Another size smaller.
A little curl in my hair
... Once in a while, I wish some
miracle would change me
... But I got to remember,
I'm always gonna be a better me
than anyone else
and God doesn't make mistakes."

"God Doesn't Make Mistakes" by Carolyn Dawn Johnson

Upper right: Kelly Spicer, left, and her mother, Pat, sing along to "God Doesn't Make Mistakes" as Carolyn Dawn Johnson performs at CountryFest.

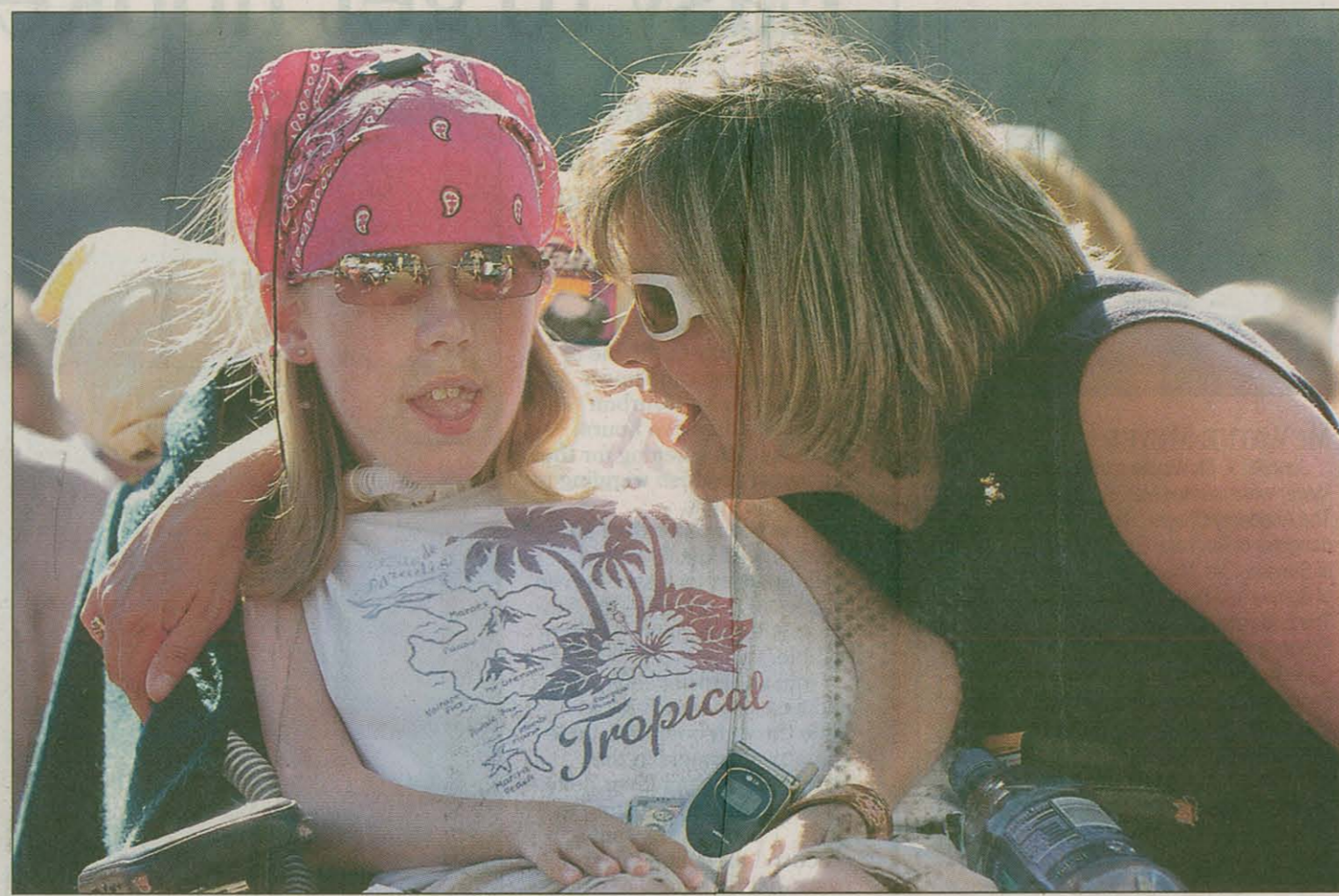


Right: Pat Spicer prepares Kelly for CountryFest, a ritual the two share before each show, with Kelly only allowing her mother to do the job.

Kelly says she still gets nervous and excited right before she meets with a star.



Pop singer Ryan Cabrera, left, happened to run by Kelly on his way to a CD signing in the plaza at The Amphitheater at Clark County. He quickly circled back and made Kelly's night by giving her an autograph and posing for pictures with her and friends, including caregiver Cynthia Chimienti, center.



From her perspective, Kelly Spicer has to be content to watch just parts of Dierks Bentley's performance at the fair, as she strains to see around fans that are dancing or just unintentionally standing in front of her.

For her, it's all about the MUSIC

Story by Brett Oppegard
Photos by Troy Wayrinen of The Columbian

"There are a lot of kids in my situation that have it worse. . . . I feel lucky to be able to do the things I do."

Kelly



Kelly's room is decorated with pictures and memorabilia from entertainers she has met in her travels to concerts throughout the region.

Kelly:

From page D1

In that moment, Kelly feels as connected to humanity as ever. She's young, having fun and simply part of the crowd. While the year-old Amphitheater at Clark County has given local residents access to some of the best performers in the world, its handicapped-accessibility sections, which Kelly calls the best in the region, give those with disabilities a clear pathway to entertainment as well.

Muscular dystrophy might be sapping Kelly's strength, as neuromuscular diseases do to more than 1 million Americans. But it hasn't diminished at all her desire to blend in with peers.

Gradually, over the course of her life, Kelly has weakened to the point where she can only move her neck and head in subtle degrees. The tracheotomy tube in her neck causes saliva to collect in her mouth, creating a steady drip. The ventilator restricts her speech. Her mouth muscles have deteriorated so much, she gets sore and tired from chewing, meaning meals often come in liquid form, dispensed directly to her stomach through a tube.

She hopes no one feels sorry for her, though. She rarely complains and generally rejects special treatment. At concerts, especially, she wants to be just another person in the crowd.

Discovering meet and greet

Kelly went to a few concerts while still a student at Hudson's Bay High School, including the Backstreet Boys and 'N Sync, but really became passionate about live music, particularly country, in the late summer of 2002, when she arranged to see Sara Evans perform at the Clark County Fair and was surprised by the anonymous gift of a backstage pass.

"That was like . . . it," Kelly said, of being unwittingly whisked through security and introduced to the country singer. "I had never met a star before . . . The rush was awesome."

Since then, Kelly has become a regular at the large venues around the Vancouver-Portland metro area, with The Amphitheater at Clark County being her favorite, where she has seen such acts as Tim McGraw, Kenny Chesney and John Mayer. She has met many famous musicians, too, including Dierks Bentley, Jo Dee Messina and Keith Urban, of which she recalls each word of their brief encounter.

"How ya doing, sweetheart," Urban asked her in his dour, Australian accent, adding, "Better now, eh?"

Afterward, Kelly's primary nurse, Cynthia Chimienti, comments, "I think he's a little arrogant."

Kelly's response: "No, he was just reading my mind."

Even though she's been through the meet-and-greet drill several times now — at outdoor music festivals, shows at the Clark County Fair grandstand, concerts at the Rose



Jenny, left, is two years younger and without muscular dystrophy, but the sisters are close and often go to concerts, such as CountryFest, together.

Garden arena — Kelly says she still gets nervous and excited right before her turn with a star.

"I don't want to say anything stupid," she said. "So I usually stick to 'Hi, I'm Kelly.' Or if it's after a show, I'll say, 'That was awesome.' Or 'That was so good.' . . . That's about it."

Making her own moments

Pat is following Kelly and her wheelchair down the hallway of their Northwest neighborhood home, when the tune "Where is the Love?" by the Black-Eyed Peas begins playing from somewhere in Kelly's lap,

Her mother can't hear her anyway over the music coming from the telephone. Pat asks again, "What's that?"

The half-dozen teenagers mingling around the place prior to the Jessica Simpson show direct Pat, in chorus, when the time came for Kelly to enter the cellular device, which Pat then holds to Kelly's ear, so she can continue the evening's coordination.

Kelly usually organizes these social outings, typically including nurse Chimienti, various neighbors and friends as well as Kelly's 19-year-old sister, Jenny. Through e-mail and cellular calls, Kelly keeps the informal club abreast of upcoming shows as well as connected to her life as closely as she can. This, she acknowledges, is the age in which people start to go on their own ways.

Pals at home, hell at school

Growing up, there were more than a dozen kids (all within four years of each other) who lived on Kelly's dead-end street, adjacent to Benjamin Franklin Elementary School.

At 5, Kelly was fitted for her first electric wheelchair, and soon afterward, all of the area children tied together their wagons and began having Kelly pull them up and down the street, like she was the train engine and they were the railroad cars.

"That was the way it was," Pat said. "They didn't look at (the wheelchair) as a hindrance at all. Those kids never looked at her as being different. They accepted her and respected her as she was . . . In her mind, Kelly would not let herself be thought of as different."

She was going to do what everyone else was doing."

That included public school. The Spicer home was within the Shumway Middle School district, but because that historic building (now the Vancouver School of Arts & Academics) wasn't handicapped-accessible, Kelly had to go to Gaiser Middle School instead, separating her from the neighborhood friends. All of this turmoil, including the agitations that come with adolescence, just as her health condition was about to plummet.

"The kids who knew me since kindergarten were used to my wheelchair," Kelly said. "They saw me as me . . . The older kids . . . Were not quite as accepting."

On her first day of middle school, Kelly remembers crying during the entire bus ride to Gaiser. Not a single person — other than assigned teachers and staff — talked to her that day. And she remembers crying the entire way home.

Weeks passed before one of the kids finally started to chat with her.

When classmates began to realize that Kelly had an active mind and was witty and clever and trendy and fun to be around, she gradually developed a group of new friends.

"I just tried to show them that I'm not really much different than they are, on an intellectual level," Kelly said. Even though she missed a lot of days because of complications with her disease, and lost the ability to write by hand before ninth grade

(using dictation for all assignments and tests), her high school GPA was 3.7. At Clark College, where she's now trying to earn an associate's degree, she's raised her GPA to 3.8.

Few people thought Kelly would make it past the seventh grade at Gaiser for reasons other than peer acceptance. During the first term, Kelly caught a cold. It worsened to the point where her parents suspected pneumonia, so they took her to the hospital. By the time they reached the emergency room parking lot, Kelly had stopped breathing.

"I can remember her saying . . . 'Mom, I don't want to die,'" Pat recalled. "I told her, 'You're not going to die.'"

Doctors resuscitated Kelly, but during the following month of rehabilitation at Doernbecher Children's Hospital, where she turned 13, her parents were advised that she might never regain her strength. Her muscles were deteriorating rapidly, atrophy in the hospital bed, with little chance of recovery. Pat and Dave Spicer were told how difficult their life was going to be with Kelly in this condition and asked if they would consider taking her off life support.

The only alternative was an immediate tracheotomy and for her to spend the rest of her life attached to a ventilator, an option that Kelly strongly rejected at first. She insisted that she could breathe without the machine. To prove it, she tried to demonstrate, removing the temporary support.

She passed out.

"It was automatic," Pat said of the ensuing tracheotomy. "Of course, . . . you do what you can."

"You don't know what you are getting into when you make a decision like that," said Dave. "You choose to do it, because that's the right thing to do . . . We were going to do whatever it took to keep her around."

Setbacks and triumphs

For most of her life, Kelly has been a sports fanatic, meeting the Portland Trail Blazers in the early 1990s through the Make a Wish Foundation, keeping highly detailed statistics for her brother's baseball teams (Craig, 19, is Jenny's twin) and centering her senior project in high school around the benefits of athletic competitions. As her condition has worsened, though, Kelly has transferred that passion to the more accessible stage shows.

"Even though she's been unable to do things physically," Dave said, "she's been very good at finding things to keep her going."

Concerts, in particular, have given Kelly something to build her activities around this summer. She keeps track of various performers on the Internet, watches them on television and, in rock star fashion, recently had Chinese symbols tattooed on the back of her neck that translate to "determination."

Even though the tattoo was against her parents' wishes, Pat acknowledged that at least Kelly chose something that fit her grit.

Prescribing positivity

In passing the time, Kelly enjoys recounting her various concert adventures so far this summer. Reliving them with Chimienti, Pat and Jenny. Spinning the stories for friends who weren't there. Building her scrapbooks and photo albums.

From the Tim McGraw show, she recalled the uncomfortable feeling when a drunken middle-aged man approached her and went overboard with his praise. Rubbing her legs was fine, calling her beautiful was nice, but when he kept at it, Kelly said, "Thanks, I think," and signalled for Chimienti.

Just last week, there was Wolfstock at the Clark County Fair. Three country concerts in three nights, Kelly said she still was recovering on Wednesday.

At the recent CountryFest in St. Helens, Ore., Kelly and Pat didn't say a word, just shared a loving look, when Carolyn Dawn Johnson sang the tune "God Doesn't Make Mistakes," which includes the lyrics:

"A couple inches taller
Another size smaller
A little curl in my hair
... Once in a while, I wish some miracle would change me
... But I got to remember, I'm always gonna be a better me than anyone else
and God doesn't make mistakes."

It's a sentiment that Kelly and Pat have believed for a long time.

Comparing all of her experiences when thinking back to the much-anticipated Jessica Simpson show, Kelly acknowledges being disappointed. Jenny, Chimienti and friends spent the entire night at the edge of the stage, with most of them wildly trying to get Simpson to at least glance Kelly's way, by pointing and jumping and screaming. No luck. No meet and greet, either.

What could have been an extremely dispiriting evening, though, was tempered by opening act Ryan Cabrera, who offered a signed CD giveaway at intermission. As Jenny and Kelly tangled with the masses in the plaza, Cabrera happened to run right by them. He stopped, came back, and personally gave Kelly a CD, posing for pictures, too.

When Kelly returned to her seating area, she noticed another girl in a wheelchair who hadn't been as fortunate. So Kelly sent her sister over with the CD, as a gift, and the girl's solemn expression suddenly turned joyful and thankful, as subtle as it was, punctuated by a smile.

That was worth more to Kelly, she said, than anything tangible, any memento to hold. Like the music she savors so much, such memories aren't contained in physical form.

"It's not like I have to sit around all day and sulk in self pity," she said. "I still have a lot of outlets . . . There are a lot of kids in my situation that have it worse . . . Can't leave the house . . . I feel lucky to be able to do the things I do."