



## Grief Beyond Words

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By Richard Jerome

**Singer Steven Curtis Chapman Mourns the Death of His 5-Year-Old Daughter Maria—and Comforts the Teenage Son Who Accidentally Struck Her with the Family's SUV**

Along with their faith, Grammy-winning Christian singer Steven Curtis Chapman and his wife, Mary Beth, have a passion for family that fills Peach Hill, their Victorian home in rural Franklin, Tenn. The couple had three biological children and went on to adopt two girls from China—Shaohannah, now 8, and Stevey Joy, 5. Then in 2004, after Chapman had performed at an Easter service in Beijing, a missionary couple introduced him to a spunky 1-year-old orphan by the name of Maria. "There was an immediate connection," recalls family friend Scott Hasenbalg, who was there. Getting into the car, Steven called his wife and said, "I think I may have met another Chapman."

Maria Sue Chapman it was. A tiny girl with an outsize personality, she quickly became the family's "cuddle bug," who loved drawing flowers, Disney's warrior princess Mulan and helping with the dishes—buck naked. Like the other Chapmans, she was happiest when surrounded by her clan. "Five or ten times a day," her mother recalled, "Maria would say, 'I love it when my whole family is together.'"

The family was together when Mary Beth spoke those words May 24, but in a way no one could have imagined. Gathered with more than 1,000 mourners at Nashville's Christ Presbyterian Church, the Chapmans said a final goodbye to their little girl, killed at age 5 on May 21 in her driveway when one of her teenage brothers inadvertently backed into her while parking the family's Toyota Land Cruiser (see box). As Steven frantically performed CPR, according to a neighbor, 18-year-old Caleb and 17-year-old Will were on their knees, reaching to the sky, crying "Why, God? Why?" Flown to Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Maria died of her injuries. No charges will be filed, says Tennessee Highway Patrol spokeswoman Laura McPherson, who called the death "a tragic accident."

The incomprehensible sorrow came at a joyous time in the Chapman home. Only days before Maria's death, Steven, 45, and Mary Beth, 43, had celebrated the engagement of their 22-year-old daughter Emily. Caleb, who plays backup guitar for his dad on tour, was polishing a piece he would perform at his high school graduation May 25. And on May 13 Maria herself had blown out the candles on her birthday cake. "We had talked with her about what it meant to be with Jesus," Steven said, speaking from a podium at the service. "We had no idea how soon it was going to be."

It was a true test of faith for the Kentucky-born Chapman, who had, until this point, led a

blessed life. The five-time Grammy winner has sold more than 10 million albums and garnered 44 No. 1 singles on the Christian charts. Almost as much as for his music, he is known for championing adoption. Since 2003, his Shaohannah's Hope charity (shaohannahshope.org) has given out about \$4.8 million to approximately 1,600 families adopting children from 30 countries.

Last year Steven released a song about fatherhood, inspired by his young daughters, titled "Cinderella." The chorus now rings achingly poignant: "Oh I will dance with Cinderella/I don't wanna miss even one song/ 'Cuz all too soon the clock will strike midnight/ And she'll be gone."

**Contributors:** Eileen Finan/Franklin, Kristen Mascia/New York City.

#### **A Preventable Tragedy**

Last year 106 children were killed in back-over accidents—with a family member at the wheel 70 percent of the time, says Janette Fennell of the nonprofit Kids and Cars. "This can happen to the best parents," she says. Partly to blame, says Fennell, is that popular SUVs tend to have larger "blind zones"—in one case, 69 ft. In February a new federal law took effect requiring American automakers to meet rearview-visibility standards. Some manufacturers already are installing rear cameras and sensors in new vehicles. Drivers of older vehicles, Fennell says, should consider having cameras installed. [www.kidsandcars.org](http://www.kidsandcars.org)

Published in the June 23, 2008 issue: In our June 9 issue we misspelled the Web site address for Steven Curtis and Mary Beth Chapman's adoption aid charity Shaohannah's Hope. The address is [www.shaohannahshope.org](http://www.shaohannahshope.org).

<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20204154,00.html>

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