

Eating Disorder survivor tells teens to choose life

By Keri Mitchell

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BAYTOWN – A survivor of a 15-year battle with eating disorders, Shannon Cutts believes her calling is to encourage young people to choose life.

Anorexia, a method of starving oneself, and bulimia, binge eating then causing oneself to vomit, ended her life as she knew it as a high school senior.

A lover of music, she received scholarships to prestigious music colleges across the nation. But the diseases racked her hands with tendonitis, ruined her voice and kept her from performing for a number of years.

Now 33, Cutts sings and plays guitar once again for church youth groups, schools and eating disorder treatment centers. On Sunday, she visited with teenagers at Cedar Bayou United Methodist Church. “My hands hurt constantly – they hurt right now,” Cutts of Houston said. “But I have life experience that kids need to know about.”

Mixing in songs she has written about her struggles, Cutts shared her journey of defining herself by the standards of magazines and marketing strategies. She began worshipping *People* magazine as a young girl and, without realizing it, began thinking that thinner is better and prettier is happier. “I accepted somebody else’s belief that they created to make a buck off of me,” Cutts said.

A marketing major during college, she said advertising tactics now make her sick to her stomach. Many ads showing models with unattainable bodies are geared at 12- to 25-year olds – the age group with the largest percentage of eating disorders, she said.

Eating disorders are one of the top five causes of mental illness among adolescents and the leading cause of adolescent mental illness-related deaths. In a high school of between 2,000 and 4,000 students, one of two students will die from the disease, she said.

Anorexia and bulimia are no different than alcoholism and other addictions, Cutts said, except that food is essential for living. “If you’re addicted to heroin, you can find places to go where heroin is not readily available,” she said. “But food is everywhere. You can’t go to a gas station without being confronted.”

For Cutts, it came down to a choice between music and the eating disorders. She taught herself how to eat, sought a counselor’s help and got the chance to make a CD.

Every day, she told the teenagers, they have to make a choice between giving up and starting over.

Austin Dean, 13, said Cutts’ message about eating disorders did not really apply to him, but hearing about her struggle for survival affected him. Cutts told the boys in the audience that eating disorders might affect them more than they think. Women around them – girlfriends, friends, sisters and mothers – could be afflicted with anorexia and bulimia.

If not, it could directly affect them. Even though there are 10 women with eating disorders to every one man, 1 million men in the United States suffer from anorexia and bulimia, she said.

Cutts’ website – www.key-to-life.com - encourages people to send her emails. Some teenagers approach her at events, but most feel more comfortable writing to her, she said. Sometimes they or their parents write just once, but several girls send her e-mails once or twice a week.

Julie Whiteneck, Cedar Bayou’s director of youth, invited Cutts because she wanted her group to hear about her journey firsthand. Just reading stories about eating disorders does not make them come to life, she said, and having Cutts make a presentation allowed the teenagers to ask questions once the story ended.

“It’s a good message about hope,” Whiteneck said. “When your life is down and out, there’s always something more.”