

## **“Key to Life”**

**Performer, speaker shares message of recovery**

**By Lora Neu, *Editor***

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At 33 years old, singer and songwriter Shannon Cutts has spent nearly half her life living with, and battling, an eating disorder. Having finally recovered from both anorexia and bulimia, Cutts shares her story of hope, in addition to sharing important information about eating disorders, to a wide variety of audiences.

Cutts will present her ‘Key to Life’ program in January at Wickenburg’s Remuda Ranch, an in-patient program for women and girls suffering from anorexia and bulimia.

The program is in two parts. The first part is a focus on addictions awareness, a message that she hopes to share further in public schools.

The second half of the program deals with making good decisions and redirecting attention away from fears and anxieties.

To increase awareness about eating disorders, she shares her own story with her audiences.

The Houston native, on looking back after her recovery, realized that a traumatic experience at age 11 triggered her anorexia. Actually, three different events came together in about the same time period, one of which was her brother’s medical problems. “My brother went into the hospital for a series of painful operations,” she explains. “I just stopped eating. My family, bless their hearts, didn’t notice because of my brother.”

Other factors included dieting, a move from elementary to middle school, a traumatic incident with a babysitter, and her family’s absence due to her brother’s surgery – all contributed to the young girl’s feeling that her life was out of her control. “I found something I could control,” she says of the anorexia. “Now, I know exactly when it happened, then I didn’t,” she says.

“So many things can trigger an eating disorder,” Cutts says. Part of her program includes sharing information that explains both anorexia and bulimia, as well as what the warning signs are.

Anorexics starve themselves. Usually they maintain a weight that is at least 15 percent below the appropriate level.

### **Warning signs include:**

Loss of menstrual period; dieting obsessively when not overweight; claiming to feel “fat”; preoccupied with food; denying hunger; excessive exercising; weighing themselves frequently; depression. Binge eating may also accompany the symptoms of anorexia.

Basically, low weight, a weight phobia, distorted body image and loss of menstrual period are the main criteria for diagnosing anorexia.

Bulimia, on the other hand, is characterized by bingeing on large amounts of food and then purging the calories by vomiting, starving, exercise or laxatives.

**Some of the warning signs include:**

Preoccupied with weight; strict dieting followed by bingeing; overeating; high calorie intake; use of laxatives; diuretics; dieting or vomiting to control weight; using the bathroom after meals; secretive about binges; planning binges; depression.

Binge eating and purging at least twice a week for three months is a sign that an individual, most likely a young woman, is bulimic.

There are five to 10 million adolescent girls and women, and one million males who suffer from eating disorders in the United States. More than 90 percent of eating disorder victims are females between the ages of 12 and 25. Sadly, it is estimated that as many, or more, than 50,000 people die each year from eating disorders.

In the final stages of her recovery, Cutts was helped by her work on her CD, "Modern Day Eve". Though she had begun to control her anorexia, like many others with the eating disorder, she compensated by becoming bulimic.

The 5-foot 6-inch young woman is now at about 120 pounds. With the anorexia she hovered around 90 pounds. "When I started working with my producer, it forced me to get really serious about the last stages of my healing," she says. "I wasn't real bad, but just wouldn't give it up or let it go."

While Cutts did not have the opportunity to participate in an in-patient facility like Remuda Ranch, she did eventually find a counselor who could help her. "I did not go through a structured program. During the time period I developed the disease, back then, we didn't know what was wrong with me."

Through her recovery experience, she has found that there are four different levels of team members needed to help an "addict" to reach recovery.

For the body, which those with eating disorders often deplete to the point of death or disability, a medical doctor and a nutritionist or dietician will be needed.

"An anorexic can be an odd animal," Cutts says. "When they do eat, they often want it to be something they like." Pizza, Pepsi and Peppermint Patties were some of Cutts' favorites. "I had no concept of sugar being caloric, I would throw apples out." Cutts has a great deal of respect for the types of programs that Remuda Ranch offers. In a structured program, all of the elements can be brought together.

For the mind, a social work or psychologist is in order. Emotionally, a person with the addictive behavior of an anorexic or bulimic may benefit from drugs prescribed and supervised by a psychiatrist.

For the heart and spirit, a vocational counselor, mentor, pastor, or teacher can help individuals find what is truly important in their lives, and what is worth living for.

“An eating disorder can rob you of the ability to have children, robs relationships, takes your life, and steals your dreams,” Cutts says.

For Cutts, losing the ability to sing and play music because of the physical debilitation was a wake up call for her. Realizing that she was losing the battle, she turned towards helping hands for the answers to her questions.

In her program, “Key to Life: unlocking the door to hope”, Cutts shares how she found her ‘key to life’, the one thing that mattered to her more than holding onto the disease.

For Cutts, that ‘key’ was music. Growing up in a musical family, Cutts is an accomplished musician, singer and songwriter. Cutts seeks to bring the healing, unifying and uplifting power of music to all who will hear it.

Recovery information and resources:

[www.key-to-life.com](http://www.key-to-life.com)

[www.remudaranch.com](http://www.remudaranch.com)

[www.edreferral.com](http://www.edreferral.com)

[www.anred.com](http://www.anred.com)

[www.bulimia.com](http://www.bulimia.com)