

Local duo to take 'Oddwalk Ministries' to NCCYC in Kansas City

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Messenger editor

Life can be a strange journey when viewed from the present, but looking back, we can see the path that has been leading us irrevocably to the present moment.

This strange journey has brought two men together, to travel and minister through music and story, to the ever-present Christ in each of us, helping others see how their journey can be amplified and enriched.

Oddwalk Ministries, a name based loosely on the disciples' walk to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel, at first seems a strange name for a musical duo, but Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson, both musicians and ministers who met at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, say "not so."

The disciples didn't recognize Jesus at first, and sometimes as we try to determine what path should be ours, it may seem to be a strange journey, hence, for them, "Oddwalk Ministries."

Both are married with Cerneka and his wife, Erin, the parents of three small children.

Their personal stories and present partnership will take them to the National Catholic Youth Conference – NCCYC – a biennial gathering of youth to pray, to sing, to celebrate their Catholic faith. This year, more than 20,000 young people and their adult chaperones will converge Nov. 19-21 on Kansas City, Mo., for the event.

Oddwalk Ministries will be among the NCCYC presenters, sharing their faith through story and music at a variety of venues.

At the same time, they will debut their newest CD, "Alright Now," produced by GIA, "a leading publisher of liturgical music and music education resources," according to GIA's web site.

"What originally attracted

GIA Publications, Inc. to them was their uniqueness," Andrew Schultz of GIA said. "As performers, the duo is engaging and fun to watch to people of all ages. As composers, GIA appreciates that much of their writing is liturgically sound and usable, all the same sounding fresh and contemporary."

The Oddwalk duo is excited not only about their NCCYC appearance and upcoming CD but also about their partnership and mission to bring others to a deeper and fuller understanding of Christ.

"Our mission had to be about our journey of faith in the world and how an encounter with Christ changes that," Johnson said.

Johnson, 36, is coordinator of music and liturgy at the shrine, a position he continues to maintain.

That's where he met Cerneka in 1998 when Cerneka also worked there doing, according to him, "nearly every job there, including guest relations and leading tours."

While none of those jobs required guitar skills, Cerneka had taught himself to play and began receiving requests.

Cerneka, 34, invited Johnson to "come along" because of his talents, and the two found they had a rapport some groups must develop over time. Theirs was natural with Cerneka comfortable in front of groups and a natural to lead with the guitar.

Johnson, a self-described introvert, played, sang and told the stories that sealed the presentation together.

"He's very talented," Cerneka said. "He not only played keyboard but he was also witty and smart. He has good timing, and we tend to complement each other."

Cerneka, a director of youth ministry at St. Peter Parish in Jefferson City, Mo., stays close to his roots at the shrine in Belleville, which



Shannon Cerneka, left, and Orin Johnson partner in "Oddwalk Ministries" to compose, sing, tell stories to enrich and deepen the faith of those who hear them. The duo will perform during NCCYC Nov. 19-21 in Kansas City, Mo.

Johnson calls "home."

The two travel the country performing and praying with youth and adults.

In the early days of their partnership, Johnson said it was incredible if someone asked them to play for more than an hour: How would they fill the time? Now, they play and tell stories for an entire day if they are leading an event.

"The quantity of music, stories and prayer experiences have grown," Johnson said.

The two have ample opportunity to talk about their mission, their goals and their music as they travel to an event.

Cerneka said Johnson tends to do the storytelling. "He tells a good story in an interesting and engaging way," he said.

As the two spent more time performing, Cerneka said they "realized we were capable of having a more intentional ministry."

Their experiences have grown to include the relationship with GIA, and they both expressed excitement about the new CD, describing it as one that everyone can enjoy.

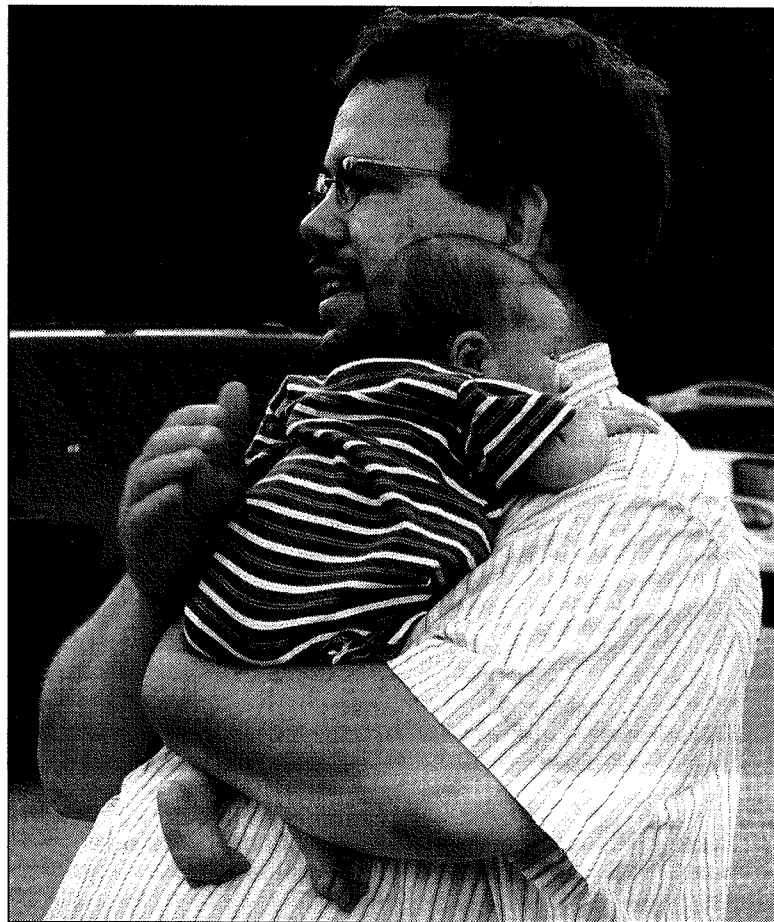
Oddwalk has also contributed 11 original songs being published in GIA's new hymnal "Cross Generation."

Since GIA produced the CDs, the songs belong to them, Cerneka said, and this arrangement gives Oddwalk small royalties on the songs.

More importantly, Cerneka said, "It will put our music in places we are not able to be; it will let the music touch people's hearts."

And most important to him, the music will be able "to lead a person to a deeper relationship with Christ and a better understanding of the church."

For Johnson, the music and the relationship with GIA are continuing to evolve in their lives.



Shannon Cerneka holds his youngest child this summer at Youth Sing Praise at the shrine.

"It's all about aligning our will, our senses to God," he said.

In their live presentations, Johnson tells stories of faith, stories that express a need to be vulnerable, to be open to that will of God.

Their message: "Don't be afraid to take a risk, especially in terms of faith," Johnson said.

As they prepare for NCCYC and their new CD's release, both see the path clearly that has pointed them on their journey to Christ and expanding others' horizons, not so much as an "oddwalk" but a sure-footed journey of faith.

"Several moments (along the way) have given Oddwalk new insight into who we are and what we are to be about as we strive to be partners in the mission of building up the kingdom of God," Johnson said.

Oddwalk will be a warm-up act for concurrent NCCYC sessions and before Fr. Tony Ricard's presentation.

They will also be part of the Comedy Club and be on the Coffee House stage twice.

Their new CD will be on sale at NCCYC.

For more information about Oddwalk, where they've been, where they're going, please go to www.oddwalkministries.com.



Orin Johnson keyboards in his office at the shrine.