

Rock-n-Roll family

By Moira K. Wiley

Living your dream isn't always easy, but local boys Nick Wheeler and Tyson Ritter are trying with their band, the All-American Rejects.

And their families couldn't be prouder.

"We think it's pretty fantastic," said Terry and Robin Wheeler. "We're very proud of Nick. It's tough for kids to live their dreams, how ever long it lasts."

"They've really grown up a lot and learned a lot along the way," added Tyson's mom, Tracey. "There's a lot to learn in the record business and I do worry about someone taking advantage of them. But they've been through some tough situations and lived through it."

"I'm happy for him," said Tyson's dad, Tim. "It's something he wants to do. It's not something he just came across, he has really put a lot of time into it. It was kind of a slow transition beginning when he played the violin for a couple of years starting in the sixth grade. He didn't pick up the bass guitar until later and he learned how to play completely by ear. I think that's what makes him a better player."

Even their siblings are proud.

Tyson's 20-year-old brother, Zack, said he's thrilled for his brother. "He's got the talent, potential and drive. He's a natural. I'm going to try to go to all of his shows I can."

"Bailey (Tyson's 8-year-old sister) thinks it's great," said Tracey. "She promotes him highly at school. She's very excited for him and is looking forward to seeing him when they come to Oklahoma City."

Both boys are Stillwater High School graduates ó Wheeler in 2000 and Ritter in 2002.

Ritter actually finished school early so he could go on tour and record their debut album in New York. He was 17 at the time.

"Ty worked hard to finish early, but he came back in May to walk with the rest of his class," Tracey said. "He went to New York after Christmas break and was there for six weeks with Nick to record the album. Ty being in New York was kind of scary, but he called a lot. Plus, the boys stayed in the producer's loft where they had a phone we could reach them at when we needed to.

"While they've been touring this year, Ty still checks in about once a week," said Tracey. "Although he's pretty independent, he likes knowing what's going on at home."

"It's both exciting and scary," added Robin. "The music industry has a bad reputation, but everyone they've been working with has been so nice. The people are very friendly, business-oriented, but still just people."

Once they got going with their demo album in spring of 2000, it only took the Rejects about two

years to go from playing to 100 people to playing to sell-out crowds in venues holding more than 1,000 people.

"It's really funny," said Tracey. "I can remember going to one of their shows and standing in the back with maybe a couple 100 people showing up. Then, in December when they played at Bricktown Brewery, there was well over 1,000 people. Now, they're doing one show after another and are so busy with interviews."

"It wasn't easy though," said the Wheelers. "They lived through the time when they'd take almost any offer. They just wanted to make a name for themselves. And, they never got disappointed. They did a lot of shows for free or very little money and now it's all finally paying off."

"They worked their butts off all the time and are still very dedicated," added Tracey. "They did a lot of this on their own and, fortunately, caught a lucky break, too."

The lucky break came in the form of a demo version of their album heard by a record company executive's teen-age sister.

"They sent hundreds of demos out to record companies," said the Wheelers. "One company belonged to a younger couple and the man had a teen-age sister named Laura.

"He gave her a handful of demos he was going to throw in the trash and one of them was the All-American Rejects. She liked the album so much, she told her brother he had to listen to it."

The rest, as they say, is history. Their debut album was released by Doghouse Records in the summer of 2001. The Rejects are currently touring the U.S. promoting the self-titled album, which was re-released by Dreamworks Records nationwide on Tuesday. Dreamworks purchased their contract with Doghouse before the album hit the stores and has signed the duo to a five-record deal.

"Dreamworks had never bought a group's contract before their record had even hit the stores yet," Terry said. "It proves how much they liked their music. And, they weren't the only ones. A lot of labels contacted the boys, including many of the bigger ones, but they decided to go with a smaller label, so they'd get more exposure."

"One of the best things about their current tour is all the clubs they are playing at are offering all-ages shows," Robin added. "So, everyone can go and watch the boys play. This is great, because their music has become really popular with people of all ages."

The new-found fame, however, hasn't gone to the boys' heads and they haven't forgotten their roots. They still have an apartment in Stillwater and use it as home base with no intention of changing. And, through it all, they've kept the negative aspects of the music industry at bay.

"They've grown up together and are pretty good kids," Tracey said. "Ty's very responsible. He has no interest in the drug scene, he always says why would he want to get into drugs, it just messes everything up. Money isn't the issue either, he just wants to play. I'd like to think I helped shape him into the person he is."

"Nick is still using the same acoustic guitar we got him for his 8th birthday," said Terry. "He bought all his other equipment with the money he earned teaching guitar lessons at Daddy-O's

Music. He taught there for about five years, starting when he was 14. He's been playing since he was 7 and now he's getting to live his dream."

The Rejects are playing with touring band members, Mike Kennerty on guitar and Chris Gaylor on drums. They are touring with three other bands, Home Grown, Riddlin' Kids and Flashlight Brown.

The tour takes them from the west coast to the east coast with two scheduled stops in Oklahoma. They have a show in Oklahoma City on Saturday at the Diamond Ballroom and one in Tulsa on Sunday at Cain's Ballroom. Fans can also catch the band on the "Late Late Show with Craig Kilborn" on Thursday and their debut video for "Swing, Swing" is being played on MTV.

For information about the All-American Rejects, visit <http://www.allamericanrejects.com>

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