

# Local songwriter reaches out with music

BY JOSEPH RYAN

Daily Herald Staff Writer

As Maria Graft listened to the powerful music of internationally famous Darlene Zschech at a religious concert in Wheaton seven years ago, her life began to change.

"I was crying. It was very moving, very powerful," the Inverness resident and former school teacher said. "It really felt like God was saying, 'This is where you need to be.'"

That year, Graft started to become more enthusiastic about her religion, and she also kicked-started her musical talents that had remained largely dormant since high school.

The energy Zschech seemed to pass to Graft later empowered her to create her first official recording, a collection of lullabies to her three children.

Three years after her first release, Graft is making public her most recent attempt at spreading spirituality.

With 10 self-written songs of hope and rebirth, Graft hopes to do for others what Zschech did for her. Most importantly, she wants to reach out to those most down — jailed youth.

The road to prison is not easy for those like Graft.

"It is very hard to get into prison. It is very hard to say, 'I want to do something good for these people here,'" she said.

In December while working with area ministries, Graft landed a single gig at a teen prison attached to the Robert Ellsworth Correctional Center, a facility for female prisoners in Racine, Wis.

"That was so affirming to me, singing for those teens," she said.



PAUL BEATY/DAILY HERALD

**Musician Maria Graft practices at Holy Family Church in Inverness. Graft hopes her spiritual music will help change the lives of those who listen to it. She has a special interest in prison ministry.**

## If you go

**What:** Release concert for "Running Home" by Maria Graft of Inverness

**When:** 8 p.m. April 17

**Where:** Holy Family Church, 2515 Palatine Road, Inverness

**Info:** [www.mariagraft.com](http://www.mariagraft.com)

"Immediately when I would stop singing they would still be singing the chorus. Later, some said, 'I know I totally have gone down the wrong path.' That, to me, is the payoff."

When her latest CD, "Running Home," was produced, she sent 70 copies to those teens.

"They kept saying I would forget about them," Graft said.

Graft wants to keep working the prison circuit, though she

said it is hard to gain the trust of correctional facility authorities.

At the same time, Graft also plans to continue touring local churches and other venues, such as malls. Most of all, she wants to reach out to those who are not likely to hear the fast-paced, multi-instrument, spiritual music she produces.

"My goal is really to spread the gospel, to spread the good word of Jesus," she said.

But Graft wasn't always so charged by religion.

"I wasn't necessarily a good girl," she said. "I went to church every week but I don't think any of the religious rituals meant much to me. I didn't have a full understanding of that. All of this was a growing experience."

"I know there are people sitting in church who have gone every week of their lives and it is not meaningful to them," she said.

Yet since Zschech's concert for

the Wheaton congregation of Willow Creek Church, Graft, a pianist, has been singing with spirit across the area.

She made an appearance on the "Intermissions" CD by the Dameans in 1997. She was the opening act for Avalon at Holy Family Outdoor Fest in 2001.

She also performed two concert tours with fellow religious artist John Angotti. One tour was in Chicago, and the other in Milwaukee. For her latest CD, Graft teamed with popular Christian rock producer Morgan Cryar and Premier Records.

Despite the substantial money she had to put down for the new recording, Graft said she is not out to make a buck.

"Every person you talk to, every person you encounter, you affect them," Graft said. "Whether they are Christian or not, I feel in some way I will affect them."