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Choosing to attend most events at Memorial Auditorium is relatively simple. Either you like All Star Wrestling or you don't. Either you hand over 15 bucks to see B.B. King or you put it towards rent.

But you put a little more on the line when you go to see Grace.

Not 45 minutes into the program, she's going to ask you to walk down the aisle and turn your life over to God. She's the singing evangelist who was pictured in the paper. The ad said thousands of documented healings have occurred while she prayed. "Come, expecting to receive YOUR miracle from God," it said.

You could walk out after her free concert and never be the same.

"I don't know if this is for me. I just came here to check it out," said Gloria Rojas. The 32-year-old speech therapist sat 31 rows away from the stage debating whether or not to stay. "I believe in healing. I just wanted to see what this lady is all about."

Grace DiBiccari strode onstage, clutching a microphone, singing, "Hallelujah, I have Jesus in my heart and I no longer am alone." She looks like a country music singer — satin gown; Loretta Lynn hair; long, polished fingernails; big, sparkling rings. People who travel with her tease her that once she warms up, she starts talking Southern even though she's New York-born and raised.

"How many of you have come here today to check me out?" she asked. Hands went up. "Good, God's going to check you in."

Her voice is sweet, but strong. Her effervescence bubbles it over into a raspy enthusiasm, like Marlo Thomas'.

She asked how many skeptics were in the audience.

Unabashed, Phil Provencher raised his hand. The Williston man said he was curious. And his wife, Flo, lost her hearing in one ear last fall; he had heard that Grace has the power to heal.

"I didn't ever ask to do this," Grace said, sitting in her dressing

room before the service. "I was going to sing." A Bible cradled in a worn leather carrying case lay open on the table in front of her. She gave her life to God when she was five years old and told him to use it however he wanted. "And he took me up on it."

The first healing occurred at a service 12 years ago when a paralyzed man walked to the front of a Connecticut auditorium. "I said, 'Oh my God, he's been healed.' And I didn't understand it."

"I never know what I'm going to do when I step out on that platform," she said. "I'm led by the Holy Spirit."

People would be healed in Memorial Auditorium Saturday night, she predicted. "I'm sure that before the night is over you'll see miracles."

After her third song, she eased into the subject, first telling her own history.

She was born Grace Tsakanikas, with blue-black hair and large, flashing eyes pronouncing her Greek and Italian heritage. Her first home was a tiny apartment above a bar in White Plains, N.Y.

Her father was a chronic gambler, who beat her when he lost. Her mother was blind. Grace, the oldest of three children, laid in bed each night wondering about her father's luck. When she was five she talked to Jesus about the beatings. "... I was engulfed in a peace that has no explanation," she said. "And I asked the Lord to lay down beside me and I'd wait." The beatings continued, but they didn't hurt anymore.

When Grace was 10, her father left for good.

It was St. Mary's auditorium in Ridgefield, Conn., where she discovered the healing power that runs through her. First, she joked about her son's Little League game that night. He had asked her to pray that his team would clobber the other one. She told him she'd say two prayers — one for each team to give them something to sweat over. "But you know," she told her audience that night, referring to the thunderstorm raging outside, "God clobbered both teams!"

Then she spotted a man sitting in back in a wheelchair. She saw a vision of him completely healed, approached his wheelchair and heard an inner voice commanding her to



Several people lie on the Memorial Auditorium floor after being touched and prayed for by Grace.



Moments after Grace touched the head of Helen Goulette of Burlington she got up and walked without the cane she normally uses to get around.

tell him to be healed in the name of Jesus.

After he walked up front, others approached, wanting to be healed. Grace stood on the left of the auditorium. When she lifted her hand and said, "Praise God," they crumbled to the floor.

So, Grace moved to the right side of the auditorium thinking, "I'm going to go over here where these people are normal and I said, 'Praise God,' and they all went down."

She stood in the middle and finished the concert without moving, she said, then went into hiding for three and a half weeks.

Some of the thousands of healings that have occurred since then are described in the book about Grace released last week. People have apparently been cured of cancer, multiple sclerosis, deafness, blindness, drug and alcohol addiction and depression. "Before" and "after" X-rays are compared in the book. Clean bills of health issued by doctors are reprinted.

Her concerts are free. About half of the 1,178 chairs were filled Saturday night. Collection baskets were passed once. Donations don't always cover expenses, said Larry James, executive vice president of the Brookfield, Conn.-based Grace 'N Vessel of Christ Ministries. Most of those who travel with Grace pay their own way.

"I tell people it's not this Grace that heals you; it's the grace of God," she said. And she tells them not to throw any medicine away before talking to their doctors.

Pearl Boyer said she would see her doctor first thing Monday morning. When the backs of Grace's splayed fingers pressed against Boyer's forehead Saturday, the 43-year-old Winooski woman slumped backwards into the arms of an usher. "I don't know (what happened). I didn't pass out," she said. She's been taking prescription drugs for 10 years to combat depression and a nerve problem. When she got up, she said she didn't need the drugs anymore. "I have wanted it for so long," she said into the microphone Grace held. "And I feel good..." She fell to the floor again.

"This is our God. He works like this," Grace said.

Tears filled Boyer's eyes. She clasped her hands together, was radiant. "I've got to watch my mother. She's going to get her sight back tonight."

Grace moved through the aisles, stopped and named the affliction of someone sitting nearby. "There's someone here with pain in their back and left hip ... Someone here has trouble in the digestive tract ... Someone here has pain down their neck, and behind each ear lobe."

"I never heard about her till I came here," said Bertha Chartrand, 59, Shelburne. When Grace prayed, Chartrand fell to the floor and her neck pain was gone. "I can't explain it; it was great."

Ralph Tatro of Rutland marched around the auditorium without the crutches he has used for 34 years.

Helen Goulette of Burlington held her cane high and did the same thing.

The 3 1/2-hour service wound down and people lined both sides of the auditorium waiting for their turn to join the blessing line. As Grace touched or pointed at them, many staggered and fell to the ground.

Burt Harvey just shook. The tall, tan, 23-year-old had come with an open mind, not expecting anything. "But I started shaking like a leaf ... and there was nothing I could do about it."

Skeptical Gloria Rojas' seat had long been empty by that time.

When the service ended, Tatro leaned on his crutches and moved with the crowd out the front door. Flo Provencher didn't get her hearing back. But she still had her faith, she said.

There were mostly ushers left. Harvey sat in the front row, talking about the service. "I was very, very moved by the whole thing," he said. To believe that anything's real "I have to be able to see it, touch it and feel it. And," he concluded, "God is real."

He bounded out of the auditorium, holding a copy of Grace's biography on top of his head. He got to the door and looked back over his shoulder. "Grace," he yelled. "You're amazing."

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