



OVERLAND PARK & LEAWOOD

# Teen musician Gracie Schram melds her passions for music and community service

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR



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Listen to Gracie Schram, 17, sing one of her songs while playing the guitar in the living room of her Leawood home.

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By McClatchy

“Be more country.”

“Be more pop.”

“Change your look.”

“Try to be the next Taylor Swift.”

In the past four years, while navigating the Nashville, Tenn., music scene, Gracie Schram has heard it all. Instead of arguing or complying, Schram smiles sweetly and continues on the path in life that has served her well since birth: She stays true to herself.

Maintaining authenticity in the entertainment industry, however, comes with sacrifice. The Leawood teenager has turned down record deals, and she’s been rejected for them.

Schram’s humanitarian spirit, which sparked her career nearly a decade ago, firmly remains paralleled to her music, placing her in a unique niche that stumps some music executives, who are unsure how to market a community-service-driven artist.

But by following her heart, the indie rock singer-songwriter has found success.

She’s traveled around the world, and she’s raised thousands of dollars to pay for an orphanage in Haiti, two fish ponds in Africa, and a new home for a family in Colombia.

Her debut album, “I am Me,” which she self-released last year, made it to the top 10 in the singer-songwriter category on iTunes during its release week. Songs from the album have been played on radio stations across the country and even overseas.

Since September, she has been on tour in front of screaming fans, opening for “American Idol” alum-turned pop heartthrob David Archuleta at sold-out venues from California to Colorado.

And as she bounced from Nashville to Los Angeles to Haiti to Colombia over the past four years, Schram has remained a dedicated Blue Valley North High School student who recently earned a prestigious \$20,000 Coca-Cola scholarship recognizing high school seniors for their ability to lead and serve. She is the only scholar to be named in the state of Kansas, joining 149 other scholars selected nationwide.

As Schram prepares to graduate in May, the bubbly 17-year-old has barely had a moment to sit down and process the fact that one chapter of her life is ending, while another one looms around the corner.

She recently chose to attend Belmont University in Nashville over colleges in Los Angeles.

Sitting gracefully on a sofa in her family’s cheerful yellow living room on a sunny Monday afternoon, Schram’s eyes grew wide when asked how she feels about moving away from Kansas City.

“It hasn’t really sunk in yet,” Schram admitted. “It’s like the end of an era.”

Processing the last decade of her life is overwhelming for the high school senior, who plans to study music business at Belmont.

At an early age, Schram developed a love for singing, songwriting and giving back to others. She started writing songs at 7, and she's been donating her birthday presents to children in need since she was 4. When those two passions collided, her life changed forever.

At 10 years old, heartbroken by images she saw of the terrible living conditions of orphans in Africa, Schram was determined to be a voice for children who are often invisible or forgotten.

"I immediately thought, 'That could be me,' but it wasn't me because I live in Johnson County with my parents," she said. "I didn't want to just feel sorry for them, I wanted to help."

She created a CD of original songs in 2009, and then another one in 2011, to raise money. Together, the albums raised \$40,000 to build an orphanage in Haiti, partnering with the Global Orphan Project, and two tilapia ponds, one in South Africa and the other in Malawi.

For her work, Schram was chosen as one of America's top 10 volunteers in the Prudential Spirit of Community Award program while she was in the eighth grade.

She received a \$6,000 personal reward and a \$5,000 check for her charity, Showers From God.

She even got to spend a weekend in Washington, D.C., rubbing elbows with politicians and befriending other selfless kids from around the nation.

Releasing her music also had an unexpected outcome, much to the surprise of her parents, both serial entrepreneurs who admit they don't have a lick of musical talent.

"Her music — standing on its own — was making an impact on people's lives," said her mom, Jill Schram. "I remember once she got an email from a woman suffering from brain cancer, who said one of Grace's songs helped her through her recovery. To hear those kinds of stories from people was eye-opening."

Soon, invites for Schram to perform began piling up. She sang at churches, Girl Scout events and schools.

She's also performed in front of thousands of people at music festivals, youth rallies and sports games.

It was during a youth rally at Purdue University when Schram realized she wanted to be a professional musician.

"Sometimes, I just watch from backstage, as a mom, but that day in particular I was out in the crowd, seeing Gracie with new eyes," Jill Schram recalled. "There was a connection she shared with the crowd, which was electric. Everyone was clapping along, it was so cool.

"As soon as she got off stage, she told me, 'This is what I need to do.' "

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The next summer, Schram's mom took her to Nashville to pursue her dream. It was a journey that came with a piece of invaluable advice.

“As we were walking into a record label for the very first time, my mom turned to me and said, ‘I’m 40 years old and I don’t need a record deal, so if this is something you really want, you have to do it yourself,’ ” Schram said.

Poised and articulate, the soon-to-be-eighth-grader took charge that day, boldly speaking up at what would be the first of countless business meetings with songwriters, music producers and record label executives.

“When you’re a kid, you’re fearless,” Gracie Schram said. “You think you can do anything. When I look back, even I’m shocked at how I was able to do it.”

Dipping toes into the music world was even a bit intimidating for Schram’s mom, a successful businesswoman who co-owns an IT company, The Purple Guys, with her husband, Jon.

“You can’t just call someone in Nashville to set up an appointment — you have to be introduced to them first, and then you’re sized up,” Jill Schram said. “It’s like you have to audition just to hire an attorney.”

Fortunately, the family had help.

Jill Schram’s close friend and former sorority sister from Kansas State University is Julie Boos, a powerhouse in the music industry.

Co-owner and vice president at Flood, Bumstead, McCready & McCarthy, Boos also is the business manager to some of the hottest country music stars, such as Blake Shelton, Lady Antebellum and Kellie Pickler, to name a few.

Upon her friend’s arrival, Boos offered advice to the mother and daughter, often pointing them in the right direction or letting them know which industry people or companies were legitimate. She eventually became Schram’s business manager.

“There are a lot of people in this industry who have just a little experience and if you don’t know any better, you grasp onto them,” Boos said on a call from Nashville. “That can be dangerous because they could give you bad advice or point you in the wrong direction. A lot of people find bad deals every day simply because they don’t know any better.”

She said Schram is lucky to have her parents’ support, both morally and financially. After all, Boos said, music is not a moneymaking business from the get-go. Sometimes you have to pay money to make money.

She also appreciates that Jill and Jon Schram are instilling their daughter with a strong business sense.

“It’s hard to be patient, because it’s so tempting to jump at the first opportunity thrown your way,” Boos said. “One thing that impresses me the most about Grace and her parents is that they’re not easily swayed. They’re discerning, and they can recognize when something isn’t a good opportunity in a long run.”

While in Nashville, Schram recorded her debut album, “I Am Me,” with Grammy-winning producer Charlie Peacock. Last May, she self-released the album, which features folksy, wholesome songs, such as “Wallflower” and “Heart Remaker.”

“My songs are my diary,” Schram said. “Music is a powerful tool because it affects people in a way nothing else does.”

Her voice may be a familiar one to many people in the Kansas City area.

Schram has performed at Royals, Chiefs and Sporting KC games. She’s performed at the Middle of the Map music festival.

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She's also been featured on the local radio stations.

Rocket, of the Rocket and Teresa Show on Mix 93.3, said Schram has made an emotional impact on station listeners.

A couple years ago, Rocket played her song "Wallflower" during a radio-thon to benefit Children's Miracle Network.

"Our phones blew up. It was magical," he said. "It was the most money we ever raised in 45 minutes. Everyone in the studio was crying. The song really touched a lot of people."

Schram had the same effect when she performed "Heart Remaker" live for listeners one day after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

Her honest lyrics and mesmerizing vocals have a way of moving people, said Rocket, who calls himself Schram's biggest fan. But it's her positivity that draws people near, he added.

"She's the kindest person I've ever met in my life and in person, she just has a special way of making people feel better," he said. "If you're ever in a bad mood, meet Gracie Schram."

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In the past four years, Schram has met loads of famous people — Chelsea Clinton and actress Freida Pinto, for example — but the people who have made the most significant impact on her life are the ones far removed from fame and fortune.

Some of her fondest memories include singing Taylor Swift songs to girls in Brazil and playing soccer with joyful little boys in Haiti.

It is a little boy in Colombia, however, who stole a piece of her heart.

Schram, along with a team from Children International in Kansas City, flew to Colombia in February 2015 to visit community centers the organization had built. The centers offer medical and dental care, plus safe places for kids to hang out, like libraries or computer labs.

While in the South American country, she toured a swampy, poverty-ridden neighborhood that had been constructed over a former landfill. She was introduced to Camilio, a 4-year-old boy living in a dilapidated shack with his mother.

He only had one toy, a broken truck with missing wheels, and Schram didn't hesitate to kneel down on the floor to play with him for half an hour.

"You couldn't even call his home a house," Schram said. "The floor was made of rubble, and the walls and ceilings had holes, and there was a terrible smell. But for me, the worst part was seeing the deep hopelessness in his big brown eyes. I had never seen that kind of sadness before."

When her debut album was released a few months later, Schram donated part of the proceeds from CD sales to build Camilio and his mom a house.

Her ability to empathize with those facing darkness struck a chord with Ryan Owen, director of development for Children International.

“You can read about this type of poverty in a magazine or see it on a television commercial, but to look someone in the eyes makes it real,” he said. “A lot of people, when exposed to this reality, turn inward because it is a lot to take in, but Gracie steps out and engages.”

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Traveling around the world, whether it’s to make music or help those less fortunate, however, is not a glamorous life for a high school student, Schram emphasized.

She often finds herself cramming a week’s worth of schoolwork into one weekend, which can make her head spin, she admitted with a laugh. Especially since Schram doesn’t shy away from difficult classes. Some of her courses include Advanced Placement calculus, biology and government, for instance.

She’s written English essays backstage, studied physics during plane rides and even worked on calculus homework during a Royals game — after performing the national anthem, of course.

In addition to her time-management skills, it’s her sparkling personality and humbleness that impress her English teacher, Shelly Weir.

“She has spotlight and fame, and people bestow her unbelievable chances in life, and she doesn’t ever take it for granted,” she said. “She knows how fleeting all of this can be and that’s why she works so hard.”

Even her famous tour-mate this past year, Archuleta, has become a Schram fan.

“I’ve loved having Gracie on tour,” he told The Star. “At first she was doing just a few shows with us, but I was so impressed by her stage presence, her message and the way she carries herself that I asked her to come back out. She relates to kids her own age in a way that inspires them. She draws them in with a light she has. She lets them know you can be young and make a difference for the better.”

Although she’s unsure what the future may hold, Schram wants to spend the next few months focusing on the present.

She plans to spend more time with her siblings, Cooper, 15, and Lucy, 12, before she goes away to school. As a scholarship winner, she’s looking forward to taking part in the Coca-Cola leadership program in Atlanta this month. Along with the other winners, Schram will take part in a community service project while there.

But most importantly, she’s looking forward to throwing her cap up in the air after she receives her diploma.

“It’s scary to leave behind what I’ve known for the last 17 years,” Schram said. “I’m really excited to graduate because it’s been a lot of work to stay in school. I could have gone to school online, and it probably would have been a lot easier, but I wanted to walk with my class.

“And you know what? All the hard work was worth it.”

#### On the Web

For a video of Gracie Schram singing, go to [kansascity.com](http://kansascity.com)