Chris Driesbach shares his journey to faith

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Songwriter Chris Driesbach could be singing the blues, but he’s not.

The former atheist will share his story and original Christian music at 7 p.m. Thursday, May 28, at Immanuel Lutheran Church, 20882 Walden Ave., Hutchinson. Admission is free and the public is welcome.

“I love, love what I do,” Driesbach said in a phone interview. “It’s a total joy. The day I have to stop doing this will be very hard. I love to tell the story. I really do. I love to get up in front of people and tell my story and sing my songs. I am a blessed guy in so many ways.”

Driesbach’s musical tours have taken him to more than 700 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and Evangelical Lutheran Synod churches in 41 states from Anchorage, Alaska, to Orlando, Fla.

The Minnesota tour, which includes the stop in Hutchinson, will feature 20 concerts over four weeks.

LOOKING BACK

“I grew up in a very dysfunctional home,” he said. “My mom was a closet drug addict. She was an LPN. Back then there were no safeguards on prescription medication as now. We didn’t find out until much later, she was staying loaded most of the time. My dad was an alcoholic, but only drank a couple of times a year, but all hell broke loose when he did. They did the best they could as parents, but a lot of things they didn’t do well.”

Driesbach discovered alcohol when he was 13. “It was the first time I felt OK in my own skin,” he said. “I was an abused child, emotionally, sexually and beaten physically. Child abuse messes with your head. You know there is something wrong with your family. Kids, without any reason, think they deserve to be treated the way they are. A lot of those kids are at risk for suicide. Shrinks told me booze probably saved my life. I had this pretty clear idea that once I was old enough to get away from this family, I will drink as much as I want. It made life OK for me.”

He was 16 when he announced he was an atheist. “I shocked people,” he remembered. “This was the 1960s. I was growing my hair. I liked being radical.”

Driesbach discovered a talent for music and turned it into a full-time career. “I was successful in a lot of ways until booze took me down,” he recalled. “I had an early, good career as an entertainer, married a wonderful woman, and had a couple of cute kids.” By age 33, it was all gone.

“In the process, I lost a home, a piece of rental property and had blown well over $100,000,” he said. “I pretty much ruined my entertainment career. I had some good opportunities. I opened a concert for Merle Haggard. I had a buddy in the entertainment field who was working to get me on Johnny Carson. I drank that away. I had a lot of opportunities that went away because I was drunk.”

At that point in his life, Driesbach was drinking a bottle of whiskey a day. Things changed when he woke up one morning with the shakes. It scared him straight, so to speak. “I knew real alcoholics shake in the morning,” he said. “I went looking for help and ended up at a twelve-step anonymous fellowship. Their solution to being a drunk is a relationship with God. I didn’t think I belonged there, but I was desperate. I thought I could do it without the God part and get some good out of it. I went to meetings and eventually began to acknowledge a higher power of some sort. I continued to hold organized religion in great contempt — even after I got sober.”

Fast forward nine years. Driesbach was playing music again in bars, sober, and living in Anchorage, Alaska. His neighbor happened to be the pastor of a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran church. The two men hit it off and became friends. One day, Driesbach got it into his head to start an argument with the pastor about religion. It didn’t go very far. Instead of debating the issue, the pastor extended an invitation to attend a new class he was starting for people just like Driesbach.

The musician couldn’t attend due to his evening schedule, so the pastor arranged for the two of them to meet once a week during the day and go over the class material. “My thought was, ‘Why not?’ I like the guy. He makes good coffee. I’m embarrassed to say this, but I thought I might change his mind about a few things. I liked the idea of scheduling an hour with him. It’s something I learned in recovery. Go to meetings, it’s good for you,” Driesbach said.

The atheist showed up ready to argue, but no one ever argued their way into faith. It doesn’t work that way. “I was just fascinated,” Driesbach recalled. “The Bible says God, the spirit, works through his word to create faith. I didn’t know that. That’s why he was reading to me out of the Bible.”

About six weeks into the process, the pastor was droning on about something when Driesbach interrupted him. It was at that point, he realized that Jesus was real. “I basically knew that stuff was all true,” he said. “In God’s eyes, I was holy and perfect because of Jesus shedding his blood for me. I was going to go to heaven. I didn’t deserve it. It was total grace. It had nothing to do with what I did. It was an amazing day.”

Driesbach called his transformation from an atheist to a believer as his “favorite story.”

“It’s the best thing that ever happened to me,” he said.

A CHANGE IN CAREER

For Driesbach, there was a definite line between his life before and after he received the gift of faith. “My old life was in shambles,” he said. “I didn’t know what to do. My pastor told me to ‘Live a life that reflects the gratitude for the gift you’ve been given.’ I always thought poor Christians struggle mightily trying to please God. That’s not it at all. We try to follow God’s commandments in response to the grace we’ve been given, not to earn it.”

With no clear direction, Driesbach continued to do what he did best — play music. But he didn’t want to play in bars anymore, so he quit. His last professional gig was on New Year’s Eve 1999.

From Nevada, he headed to Huntsville, Ala., to work for a friend who had a business selling Internet and phone services to businesses in the South. He did it for about nine months. From there, he took a job as an insurance salesman with Aid Association for Lutherans (later Thrivent) in New Orleans.

Five years later, Hurricane Katrina hit. “It completely knocked me out of the game,” he said. “There was no work to be done with my clients, so I resigned.” Meanwhile, he, like millions of others were trying to find their way through the life-altering experience of the hurricane. His condo was ruined. His church, Crown of Life, was destroyed. “You can’t imagine what it was like,” he said. “It was like walking into a set of a movie about the end of the world.”

Driesbach didn’t hold out much hope for saving the 122-member church. “I was on the council and we were going month to month,” he said. “We had some insurance but not enough. We were done.”

Driesbach happened to have all his professional music gear in the church when the storm hit.

“I didn’t have insurance and the church didn’t have insurance to cover it,” he said. “I’ll never forget hauling it out to the curb as garbage.” Things changed when a WELS videographer stopped by the church and interviewed members. The videographer sent DVDs all over the world telling about what had happened.

The response was remarkable. “Everything you can imagine was sent to us by the truckload,” he said. “We distributed most of it to our neighbors. There were 10,000 different donations, little checks from individuals and churches for a total of $2.1 million.”

Volunteers from Builders for Christ and Faith in Action also stepped up and with the donated money, the church and 41 homes were rebuilt including Driesbach’s condo in Kenner, a suburb of New Orleans. In a surprise gesture, one of the checks that got sent to the church came with a note. “We saw what happened to that guy’s musical equipment. We want to buy him new equipment. We’ll pay for it all with this check. Tell him to buy the best, get everything he needs and don’t tell him who we are.”

With new equipment and a small library of original songs, Driesbach had a vision of going around the country doing thank-you concerts. He asked a pastor friend if he was crazy to want to give free concerts and not charge for T-shirts and CDs. His friend was encouraging, “You’re not crazy,” he told Driesbach. “It will work out fine.”

The pastor did offer some advice. Your faith is weak and you won’t think God is taking care of you. You’ll get scared. You’re not humble. You’ve been working for wages. Now you’ll be a beggar. People will give you things. You have to learn to accept gifts. “He was right,” Driesbach said, looking back. “It was very hard for me. I’d almost start crying. People would give me things. I had no idea. I was so excited to do this. I was absolutely willing to be poor. I prayed; ‘God let me do this work. I’ll eat beans out of cans. Give me enough money for gas and I’ll do this faithfully for the rest of my life.’”

BECOMING HUMBLE

Driesbach put his money where his heart was. He sold his condo and gave his furniture away. He took out the seats in his car, loaded up the new equipment and took off. “That was the start — June 16, 2006,” he said. “I had a little group of churches to play for.”

Driesbach’s first concert was in Houston. From there, he went to Arizona, California, Oregon and Washington state, Montana and then all the way to Watertown, S.D. He played a couple of concerts in Wisconsin, one in Springfield, Mo., and one in Arkansas. “After that first concert, a guy walked up and said, ‘We want to thank you from the church.’ He gave me $225. Wow. It hasn’t changed a bit.”

In addition to churches, Driesbach has started singing in prisons. “It’s my favorite place to sing,” he said. “I haven’t done too many — 22 so far in the last five years. I have two more scheduled in Michigan later this summer.”

No matter where his music takes him, Driesbach keeps the focus on Jesus.

“It’s not about me,” he said. “It’s what God has done for me. I have to tell my story to show how that happened.”