

Rachel's Hope Brings Post-Abortion Healing to Incarcerated Women

By Denis Grasska

SAN DIEGO — A local ministry devoted to post-abortion healing recently brought its message of God's love and forgiveness to inmates at Las Colinas Women's Detention Facility.

Rachel's Hope, which offers post-abortion healing retreats for Catholic (and Catholic-friendly) women and men, held its first retreat for incarcerated women Aug. 12-14.

Six women attended the weekend retreat, which was held in the jail's library. An additional four women, who were unable to be accommodated, received full scholarships from Rachel's Hope and will be able to attend a retreat free of charge after they are released from custody.

'They might be behind bars ... but all women who've had abortions have that same prison that they're in.'

"For years, I have felt that a post-abortion healing program should be in jails here in San Diego," said Rosemary Benefield, founder and director of Rachel's Hope. "I made several attempts at trying to set something up, but it never happened."

That changed in May 2010 when Phyllis, co-leader of the retreat at Las Colinas, attended a silent retreat led by Miles Christi priests. During the retreat, she said, God asked her to lead Rachel's Hope retreats as a form of prison ministry.

"In my opinion," Phyllis said, "I feel like maybe those women are there because of having had an abortion and the effects that it has on you."

Deacon Jim Walsh, director of the Diocesan Restorative Justice Program, and Catherine Fahey, chaplain coordinator for the San Diego Sheriff's Department, served as liaisons

between Rachel's Hope and jail officials. The retreat leaders had to undergo background checks and attend a volunteer orientation, and the uniquely Catholic aspects of the retreat had to be removed in order to make it accessible to all Christian women.

Leslie Brunolli, who led the retreat with Phyllis, confessed that she was initially "less than enthusiastic" about going to the women's jail.

"I had a lot of preconceived ideas of what it was like being at Las Colinas because I had never been there before, and ... I thought these women might be really tough to work with," she explained. "But they were very sensitive, they were so open to the Lord, they were very spiritual."

Fahey said that, to her knowledge, this was the first retreat ever to be held at Las Colinas. Explaining why post-abortion healing is especially needed among incarcerated women, she shared a story told to her by a Sheriff's deputy.

The deputy, who works at Las Colinas, had asked an inmate about how her life had gone off track. The inmate responded that the downward spiral began when she was 13 years old and her mother forced her to have an abortion. The inmate started using drugs to deal with her depression and then began stealing to finance her drug habit.

"She's been in and out of Las Colinas ever since, and that was like 10 or 15 years ago," Fahey said. "If we could catch these types of women and have them experience the grieving process and the forgiving process for the abortion that they had ... then that might be a life-changing experience for them and maybe help with the recidivism rate."

Fahey noted that the inmates "took an even bigger risk" than the majority of women who participate in Rachel's Hope retreats.

"Women on the outside can do the retreat and not tell anybody where they're going ... but here that information would spread like wildfire," she explained. "And I will tell you that the women on the retreat loved it so much that they went back to the dorm and they were just talking it up big time."

Las Colinas Womens' County of San Diego Sheriff's Department



RACHEL'S HOPE: (From left) Phyllis, Rosemary Benefield and Leslie Brunolli pose outside of Las Colinas Women's Detention Facility.

Since the retreat, Fahey said, other women have asked her about attending a future retreat. (Plans are currently underway to hold a second retreat during the second weekend in December.)

In evaluation forms filled out after the retreat, all of the participating women reported that they had experienced healing and would recommend the retreat to other post-abortive women.

"I learned that I was a lot more deeply affected by my abortion than I wanted to admit," one participant wrote. "These beautiful women, Leslie and Phyllis, have provided me with much understanding regarding the severe and lasting effects my abortion caused. They have brought many tools of comfort and healing, and taught me how to forgive myself."

"I learned no sin is too big for God to forgive," another participant wrote. "My child is safe with God and forgives me."

For Deacon Walsh, the retreat can be seen as one of the blessings of incarceration.

"What a fantastic opportunity for women who have found themselves literally as a 'captive audience!'" he said. "God has graced them with a wonderful opportunity to which they likely

would not have been exposed on the outside. We give thanks and praise to our God, who works in such strange and miraculous ways."

Benefield said she is grateful for Fahey's assistance in making the retreat possible, as well as for the efforts of the detention center's personnel, who "were so wonderful in the way they accommodated the women." She specifically mentioned Lt. David Torkelson; Robert Vander Kamp, inmate services division manager; and Sgt. Darlene Takala.

Reflecting on her experience leading the retreat, Phyllis said she was "truly humbled to be God's instrument." For Brunolli, the greatest reward was the opportunity to overcome some of her preconceived notions.

"They're no different in the shame and the guilt and the secrecy ... than any of the other women on the outside," Brunolli said. "All women who have abortions, no matter where they're at, suffer with those feelings. They might be behind bars ... but all women who've had abortions have that same prison that they're in."

For more information on Rachel's Hope and its post-abortion healing retreats, visit www.rachelshope.org.

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