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A retreat filled with stories of post-abortion healing

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Blackwood – Donna hid her secret for 26 years. She hid it from herself, her husband and her children.

She know in her heart that God had forgiven her for the abortion that she had at age 17, but she could not forgive herself. She thought she deserved to go to hell for the inexplicable act and she continued to "resist the forgiveness" that God had given her.

That was until March of 1998 when Donna realized that she needed help in working through the pain. Friends persuaded her to seek the help of Rachel's Vineyard, a program for individuals who are experiencing the post-abortion trauma of stress, guilt, and shame.

Rachel's Vineyard began about 14 years ago. A leadership training retreat was held May 11 to 14 at Pius X Retreat House, Blackwood. Individuals from all over the country, and one from Australia, who are involved in post-abortion ministry attended. The weekend included training sessions as well as testimony.

The curriculum, written by Dr. Theresa Burke of Philadelphia, helps women and men who have experienced an abortion work through the aftermath of the decision that they made to terminate human life.

Burke said the purpose of Rachel's Vineyard is to get individuals to start the grieving process, to take responsibility for their deed and to lead them through a process of repentance and reconciliation.

They are also shown how to develop a more spiritual relationship with Christ through Scriptures and to ask for forgiveness.

Father Michael Mannion, the spiritual director of the retreat house, has been involved in post abortion ministry for years. Burke was studying for her

doctorate in counseling and psychology 15 years ago when she heard him speak at St. Joseph University in Philadelphia, and she said his views became an inspiration to her in writing the Rachel's Vineyard curriculum.

Donna, one of the women who gave testimony at the leadership training retreat, lives in a small suburban town outside of Philadelphia. She said when she got pregnant, she felt alone and scared.

"I thought my dad would kill me and my boyfriend. I was so scared and so young," Donna recalled.

She said she thought the best alternative at the time was to have an abortion. Afterward, Donna said, she did everything she could to keep the dark thoughts of aborting her baby of her mind.

"I did all kinds of things in the church," said Donna. "anything to make up for it."

It wasn't until Donna gave birth to her first child that she realized she needed to seek forgiveness. "I wanted to do anything to stop the pain after abortion," Donna said.

She attended her first weekend retreat with reluctance, but once there she began to feel the burden lifted.

"I was scared to death on Friday and by Sunday, I was relieved," she said of the retreat.

Since that time, she has been a part of the ministry. She is now an aide at retreats, helping others get through the confusion and guilt of having an abortion.

Rachel's Vineyard helps individuals through the process of grieving the baby they aborted.

"We help them develop a spiritual relationship with the aborted child, they give the child a name and reconnect with the child," said Burke. "The death is given meaning and transformation."

At the end of a retreat, participants are encouraged to write an open letter to their child, expressing their feelings and asking for forgiveness.

The retreat ends with a memorial service for the unborn.

It is very emotional, Burke said, but it helps relieve the pain.

Burke said the aftermath of abortion touches women in every aspect of their lives. In many cases, it is the cause of depression, eating disorders and mental disorders.

Of utmost importance to the healing is a reconnection to Christ and the Church, Burke said.

“We try and reconnect them through the Scriptures with Christ so that they can recognize the Christ in them and recognize Christ’s forgiveness,” Burke said.



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