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Rachel's Vineyard helps heal the wounds caused by abortion

By Julie Carroll

When Cheryl Riley learned she was pregnant at age 19, friends and family of the single teen told her an abortion would solve her problem.

Now 37, the New Jersey woman looks back on her abortion not as a solution, but as the cause of many other problems she would suffer.

"Walking into the clinic for an abortion was like walking in to get my teeth cleaned," said Riley during a recent visit to the Twin Cities. "they don't tell you what's really going to happen. The first thing they do is take your money."

As soon as she left the clinic, Riley said, she began to struggle with feelings of guilt and shame.

For years, she suffered from depression, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual dysfunction, a lack of self-worth, difficulty bonding with her other children, anger and separation from God.

Twelve years and several therapists later, Riley hit bottom.

"I thought not one person in the world could help me," she said.

That's when Riley returned to her New Jersey parish, where she heard about a weekend retreat by a post-abortion group called Rachel's Vineyard.

Riley attended the retreat at her mother's urging, and found healing.

Many women silently suffer from the effects of abortion because they don't know help is available, said psychotherapist Theresa Burke, who started Rachel's Vineyard.

Burke was surprised to discover that abortion was a common denominator among many of the women.

In 1993, Burke formed a support group for post-abortion women, which she adapted to a weekend retreat.

Today, Rachel's Vineyard retreats are offered in 46 states, nine countries and five languages. The retreats, which include ritual, Gospel reenactments, and the sacrament of reconciliation, help women recognize problems stemming from abortion, grieve the loss of their children and reconnect with God and the community, she said.

People need to grieve to make room for God's grace, Burke said. "A lot of women got to confession 100 times and don't feel forgiven. This is like a grand detox."

In one exercise, based on the Gospel story of the woman at the well, women are invited to pour water into a punch bowl while saying, "Jesus, I accept your living water." In another exercise based on the raising of Lazarus in John 1, women place gauze on a part of their body to symbolize where they hurt. At the end of the retreat, there is a memorial service for the aborted children.

Burke said she encourages couples to attend the retreat together. "You're undergoing a spiritual conversion, and you don't want to leave your spouse in the dust as you do that," she said.

Rachel's Vineyard takes its name from Jeremiah 31:1-16, when the Lord comforts Rachel, who is weeping for the loss of her children. The vineyard is from Hosea 2:15, where the Lord restores Israel to his favor.

Riley, who helps conduct Rachel's Vineyard retreats in the Newark, N.J., archdiocese, said, "I'm trying to get the message out [that healing is possible]."



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