

Ministers heal and free prisoners' souls

Editor's note: The names of the prisoners quoted in this article have been withheld.

LINDA REEVES
of the Florida Catholic staff

BELLE GLADE | A new ministry at a prison here is spiritually freeing inmates faced with emotional life sentences so that they might have a better life behind bars.

The ministry of Catholic Charities is dedicated to jailed men who are affected by abortion. For one inmate, the program helped heal and transform him on his spiritual journey while behind bars.

"I've cried, prayed and have been angry, grieved and finally came to acceptance," said an inmate in the Martin Correctional Institution in Indiantown. "I know now God has forgiven me. I now want to share this information with every man who is in my shoes. I pray this program is here to stay. Nothing but good can come out of this."

The new in-prison, abortion-healing ministry began June 2011. The initiative is a joint effort of Catholic Charities' Prison Ministry, which provides spiritual guidance to inmates and focuses on evangelization within detention centers, and Rachel's Vineyard, a healing ministry of Catholic Charities' Respect Life Office aimed at helping those suffering in the aftermath of abortion.

Using results of an informal survey of men who attend weekly Catholic services in two prisons and through conversations with inmates, prison ministers discovered that inmates who have been involved with abortions needed healing. Don Kazimir, Respect Life Office coordinator, said results showed 90 percent of the men surveyed are impacted by abortions in which they were involved some way in the past. From that fact, the ministry was born.

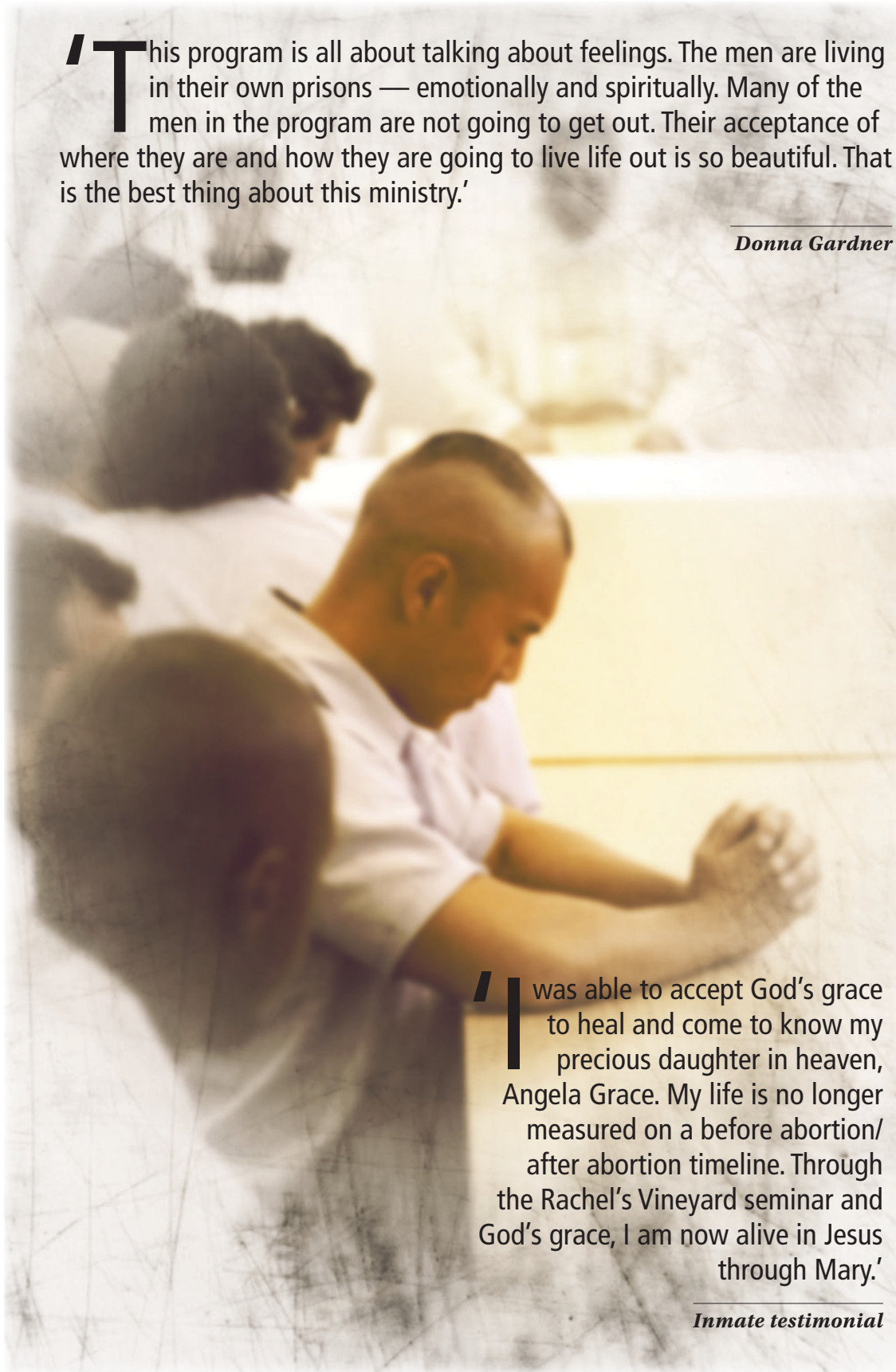
Rachel's Vineyard ministry began in the diocese more than 10 years ago, and includes intensive three-day retreats for post-abortive women and men. The retreats traditionally include prayer exercises, talks, guidance and support. Traditionally, the programs draw mostly women, but in recent years more and more men have come forward to participate in the healing retreats that teach of God's love and compassion, and help participants grieve and accept forgiveness.

The new prison pilot program is a little different from the traditional Rachel's Vineyard retreats. The healing seminars consist of weekly, two-hour, Bible study format sessions.

During the inaugural session

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Donna Gardner



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Inmate testimonial

FC FILE PHOTO | GRAPHIC DESIGN BY MICHAEL JIMENEZ

that ran 10 weeks and began last June at the Martin Correctional Institution, seven men completed the program. The kickoff program was so successful that two weeks after it ended, another session began with the approval of officials. The second session drew more inmates than the first, and additional sessions followed. A fifth program that began Oct. 1 is under way now.

In another turn of events, officials have now given the go-ahead

to allow inmates who complete the program to participate as facilitators, joining the ministry team.

"This is a big deal," said Tom Lawlor, who has been in prison ministry 17 years. "The fact that Florida Corrections and the chaplain are allowing the men to participate is quite an acknowledgment to the worth of the program."

Lawlor said the ministry inmates are "lending support 24/7," offering counseling to inmates af-

ter Catholic Charities' facilitators leave the premises. Beyond the classrooms, the men taking part in the ministry and the groups of men with common burdens of abortion are also bonding, forming friendships and building communities.

This month, the program took another stride forward. Catholic Charities' facilitators have been given the OK to bring the healing program to the Glades Work Camp of the Florida Department

of Corrections in Belle Glade.

Donna Gardner, coordinator of healing ministries of Respect Life, works with Lawlor on the ministry. She confessed she didn't know what to expect when she first stepped inside a maximum security facility or what she would experience in ministering to men who might have dangerous rap sheets. But she was surprised that during her first sessions the men, some of whom have committed serious crimes and lived with hardened and broken hearts, quickly opened up in early sessions and talked about past experiences and painful memories tearing at them.

"This program is all about talking about feelings. The men are living in their own prisons — emotionally and spiritually," Gardner said. "Many of the men in the program are not going to get out. Their acceptance of where they are and how they are going to live life out is so beautiful. That is the best thing about this ministry."

Lawlor agrees with Gardner. "To see the men unburden themselves of a great sorrow that they have carried so long and to see them reconcile with the Lord is the best part of this ministry," Lawlor said. "It is the work of God."

One of the men who went through the program and is now a facilitator described his Rachel's Vineyard experience as "a lifesaving grace."

"I was able to accept God's grace to heal and come to know my precious daughter in heaven, Angela Grace," he said. "My life is no longer measured on a before abortion/after abortion timeline. Through the Rachel's Vineyard seminar and God's grace, I am now alive in Jesus through Mary."

Another prisoner also went through the program and signed up to help the ministry as a facilitator. He said the sessions helped him realize the dramatic influence abortion had on his life.

"I now know just how much God loves me, even to the point of forgiving me for aborting my children who I now know and have a real relationship with. I know how to talk to God about how I feel and how much I wish I could go back and do it over again differently. I know I can't go back, but through Rachel's Vineyard I am walking in healing by faith."

Kazimir credited the healing efforts of Lawlor and Gardner who work together during weekly sessions.

"I am very proud of their work," Kazimir said, adding the team will speak about their "groundbreaking" initiative at the 2013 State Respect Life Conference that will be here in Palm Beach County. ■