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Rachel's Vineyard comes to diocese

By Steve Euvino

In what is believed to be a first for the state, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Gary is bringing Rachel's Vineyard Retreats to Northwest Indiana. A national program, Rachel's Vineyard is a retreat for post-abortion healing.

This program, which will include training sessions and other presentations for counseling professionals and clergy, will be held Aug. 8-12 at the Spiritual Life Center in Hammond. The retreat itself is set for the evening of Friday, Aug. 9 to late afternoon Sunday, Aug. 11.

Founded by Dr. Theresa K. Burke and Kevin Burke, Rachel's Vineyard is designed to help individuals work through the emotional pain associated with abortion. Dr. Burke has lectured and trained professionals nationally on the subject of post-abortion trauma and healing. She also facilitates Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreats throughout the country.

Locally, the volunteer coordinator for Rachel's Vineyard is Carolyn Kenning. A member of the Holy Name Parish, Cedar Lake, Kenning is a former Christian sidewalk counselor who worked outside abortion clinics. When that effort disbanded, Kenning cofounded the Northwest Indian chapter of the Children of the Rosary, a group which sponsors monthly pro-life masses and prays outside abortion clinics.

Kenning recalled talking with men bringing their female companions to the clinics. These men, she said, were emotional about the decision to have an abortion. She felt more needed to be done to deal with post-abortion issues.

"We saw a need to bring in groups of people in the same situation," Kenning said.

The Children of the Rosary posted its activities on a Web page, and a doctor already involved in Rachel's Vineyard contacted Kenning about the retreat and training programs.

Kenning is looking at a maximum of 25-30 persons for this first retreat. It is open to both genders, and confidentiality will be observed.

Rachel's Vineyard, according to its literature addresses "the soul wounds that run deep in many women and men who have aborted, those who helped to abort, and family members. Through a series of spiritual and psychological exercises, participants are able to experience their sadness and grief in the company of other women and men feeling very much the same"

The retreat is open to people of all faiths and not just from Northwest Indiana. With information placed on the Internet, Kenning said she has received inquiries from Illinois and Michigan.

The retreat, she said, is "Catholic-oriented, but it's all scriptural. It's not 'pop psychology.' All the exercises are based on scripture."

Kenning is not yet fully trained in Rachel's Vineyard counseling, but she said from her experience, "The people who have gone on the retreat that I have met are the most beautiful souls, once God's healing touches them. I have seen God's healing mercy at work, because of the retreat."

As for males at the retreat, Kenning said, "A lot of times, men coerced women into having abortions. Now they realized they were not supportive. They're hurting because it's their child."

Regarding ages of retreatants, Kenning said they could be anywhere from high school teens through 80-year-olds. There could be mother-daughter, sister-sister, or husband-wife teams at Rachel's Vineyard.

Kenning explained, "Some women carry the grief to their deathbed, and it doesn't come out until the end."

The retreat is a very specific process designed to help one experience the mercy and compassion of God. It is also an opportunity to surface and release repressed feelings of anger, shame, guilt, and grief. The retreat includes many rituals and exercises designed to help one grieve the loss of the unborn child and to receive and accept God's forgiveness. The retreat concludes with a memorial service and Mass of the Resurrection.

Sponsors of Rachel's Vineyard are Catholic Charities' Marriage and family Life Ministry and the Pro-Life Office of the Diocese of Gary.

Kenneth Flanagan, executive director of Catholic Charities, noted that Rachel's Vineyard has the support of the US Catholic bishops. His agency already sponsors Project Rachel, which provides on-on-one post-abortion counseling.

"Our goal," Flanagan said, "is to provide people a range of options as they come to terms with abortion. We want this to be a springboard for other opportunities for them."

Although the facilitator for the first Rachel's Vineyard is a trained counselor, Flanagan said Catholic Charities would be relying on volunteers to make the retreat weekend a reality. There is a charge to bringing the retreat to Northwest Indiana, and Flanagan said the retreat fees would cover those charges. He added, though, that the needs of people wishing to attend but who cannot afford the fee would be handled on a case-by-case basis.

Statements from past retreatants have included comments about feelings of relief and hope; of years of heavy guilt haunting the person; an emotional healing; a sense of peace; of the Holy Spirit at work; and of an angry person healed by love, comfort, and healing.

According to one retreatant who shared his/her feelings, and which is a part of the organization's promotional literature, "We are all at different places on our journey. And we each came here with a unique need, hope, and desire. I think each person allowed others to be at peace with where they are and still challenged them to continue."

Flanagan is excited about this new service – one which he and Kenning said should be the start of more such retreats.

"As Catholic Charities we are partnering with people in the community who have a sense of mission in this area," Flanagan said. "We see this as a move into new territory."



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