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Rachel

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With the help of a friend, Barbara Cullen, a fellow Catholic, Karminski-Burke created an intensive spiritual retreat that is now known as "Rachel's Vineyard" for women, family members, men and friends who have been involved in abortions or touched by their effects. In the past decade, Rachel's Vineyard retreats have drawn the participation of 4,000 people throughout the country, Karminski-Burke said.

The retreats were named after the Old Testament reference in Jeremiah to Rachel, a woman who mourns her lost children, and who is consoled by God. The vineyard refers to the New Testament's description of Jesus as the vine without which the branches could not exist, she said.

The first-ever Rachel's Vineyard retreat in the Diocese of Rochester is slated for Dec. 1-3. Retreat organizers have asked that the location of the December retreat be withheld to protect the participants' privacy. But further information may be obtained by calling 716/368-3204. Retreat participation is confidential.

The retreat consists of several Scripture-based rituals designed to help women work through the grief they feel over their abortions. Rituals may include the passing of a stone from one woman to another in a symbolic reenactment of the moment when Jesus saved an adulterous woman from stoning. The women speak about their sins as they hold the stone before passing it to the next woman, Karminski-Burke said. Such a ritual allows the women to "enter into the Scriptures," she said, and enables the women a chance to openly express sorrow.

The Catholic Church considers abortion a grave sin, and teaches that cooperation in the procurement of abortion incurs excommunication for all involved. However, the church also assures women and men who participate in abortion that God's forgiveness can be sought through the sacrament of reconciliation (confession). Still, such assurances don't always ring true with those who have resorted to abortion, Karminski-Burke said.



"A lot of women would tell you they went to confession 100 times, but they couldn't internalize God's forgiveness," she said.

And that's why Rachel's Vineyard works with such women, she added.

"This process takes (grief) out of the intellectual level, and that's why it's so releasing of emotions. It's a major intensive detoxification of all these feelings. People are crying the entire weekend."

Silent grief

Women who have had abortions have a particularly difficult kind of grief because it is one often suffered in isolation, according to Dr. Martha Shuping, a Winston-Salem, N.C., psychiatrist and a Catholic who has helped organize six Rachel's Vineyard retreats in her home diocese of Charlotte, N.C. And women suffering from such grief often get little help because the current popular climate accepts abortion, she added.

Karminski-Burke echoed Shuping's statements, noting that after millions of abortions in the United States, it would be difficult for pro-choice mental and physical health professionals to turn around and say they're on the wrong road.

"You don't want to admit that what you've advocated for people is painful," she said. "There's too much investment in (abortion) for anyone to examine it honestly."

But despite the fact that abortion is le-

gal, many women remain convinced it is immoral and suffer accordingly when they decide to have one, she said.

"Our human soul will not allow the stigma to be taken away because (abortion) is a violation," she said.

Shuping added that studies show between 10 and 20 percent of women have had one or more negative reactions shortly after an abortion. Even if one argues that that's a minority of women who have had abortions, given that more than a million abortions are performed in this country each year, that percentage translates into 100-200,000 women each year, she said.

On top of the fact that such women suffer without acknowledgment from the rest of the world, they also have trouble dealing with another type of suffering, according to Betsy MacKinnon, vice president for community services at Unity Health System, comprising St. Mary's and Park Ridge hospitals in Rochester.

"It's almost like with an abortion you have forbidden yourself from grieving, you have not allowed yourself to mourn (because) you caused this action," said MacKinnon.

MacKinnon has attended a Rachel's Vineyard retreat and will be staffing the Rochester one in December. She said such retreats are valuable because they bring women out of the isolation they have experienced with abortion.

"They learn that other people have stories and that other people have done things that they are less than proud of as well."

Two Rachels

Rachel's Vineyard is coming here because of the efforts of another post-abortion program already in place in the diocese, Project Rachel, which originated in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee in the 1980s. Project Rachel offers one-on-one counseling for women who've had abortions. In the Rochester Diocese, Father James E. Hewes,

pastor of St. John the Evangelist/St. Patrick parishes in Clyde and Savannah is the program's chaplain. Father Hewes said that both Rachel programs have their place in healing women. Some women are more comfortable in a one-on-one situation, he said, whereas Rachel's Vineyard participants can benefit from a group experience. "It breaks down that shame and isolation that women feel," he said.

Father Hewes added that the diocese plans to offer follow-up support to Rachel's Vineyard participants by holding regularly scheduled reunions of participants after the December retreat. He said he wants Project Rachel and Rachel's Vineyard to complement each other in this diocese, and the diocese will promote both approaches to people suffering from abortion's effects.

"I see them both as marvelous instruments of healing," he said.

And healing is what Rachel's Vineyard is all about, according to Shuping. Through the retreat, women learn that God and their babies have forgiven them, and can come to believe their aborted children are interceding for their mothers in heaven.

"People feel cut off from God after an abortion," she said. "What I believe is that God wants to restore these women."

The following groups provide information on post-abortion trauma. Project Rachel, the Diocese of Rochester's one-on-one counseling program for women and men affected by abortion, can be reached at 1-888-972-2435 or at 1-888-9-RACHEL. The program's Web site is at <http://www.dor.org/newpage3.htm>. Rachel's Vineyard retreats can be found by contacting 716/368-3204 in the Rochester Diocese, or nationally at 1-877-HOPE 4 ME.

Woman has healed from abortion

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

In 1979, Gwen Johns, a Catholic from Amarillo, Texas, found herself pregnant at the age of 17, and bereft of support from the father, her boyfriend, save the money he gave her for an abortion. After paying half the fee, the young man left for college and never saw her again.

In a phone interview, she said she recalled her parents being embarrassed by the pregnancy, because people would know their daughter had gone against the moral way they had raised her. Her parents and friends counseled her to get an abortion.

"Deep down in my heart, I felt it was going to be wrong," she said. "But it was the easy way out."

It may have felt like the easy way out at the time, she noted, but the price she paid for aborting her child turned out to be far higher than the money that financed the procedure.

"I went into a real depression," she said, noting she indulged in drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and other destructive behaviors to numb her pain — "the whole yucky nine yards," as she called it.

It was only when she decided to confess her abortion to a Catholic priest 12 years ago that she began to recover from the trauma the abortion wrought, she said. Married with children then, she brought her whole family into the process, telling them all about what she had done when she was a scared teenager.

"I'm so grateful that God in his mercy and the church welcomes us poor sinners," she said, adding that she has seven children now with her husband, Eben.

Today, Johns coordinates Rachel's Vine-

yard retreats in the Diocese of Amarillo. The three-day retreats were designed by two Pennsylvania Catholic women to help women and others affected by abortion to deal with the feelings they've experienced in the aftermath (see cover story).

Johns sees her work with Rachel's Vineyard as a way of helping women like herself who need to grieve the death of their aborted children.

"I am at peace with God, and I know that God's forgiven me, and I know God forgives other women," she said.

She also speaks out against abortion in talks to youth groups in her diocese, she said, stressing that the practice has consequences that can shatter a woman's psyche.

"Abortion is a very traumatic experience whether women want to admit it or not," she said.

It's a harsh moment when a woman realizes that she expelled a human being from her womb, she said, an experience all the harsher when she realizes she violated God's law.

But she also pointed out that many women who have aborted are not completely to blame for what they did, and need to realize that as well. Many women, like her, were compelled to abort by the pressure they felt from their babies' fathers, or their own families, she said. Denial is often the way women deal with the real feelings brought on by their decision, she said.

"There's a shame and a guilt and a wall," she said.

Rachel's Vineyard retreats encourage women to name their aborted children, and Johns said she has named her aborted child Marianne.

"I know that she's a saint in heaven," Johns said.

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