

Restorative Ministry

Grieving program addresses unresolved feelings, brings healing

BY KIPLY LUKAN YAWORSKI

A prison ministry program to help inmates deal with grief and trauma is bringing healing and changing lives.

The grief support program being offered at Saskatoon Correctional Centre to different groups of men each month includes music, meditation, journaling, therapeutic art, and sacred rituals.

Diocesan Restorative Ministry coordinator Dianne Anderson and volunteer Yvonne Powell both received grief support training last year from Dr. Jane A. Simington of *Taking Flight International*. They are now regularly providing the program to inmates with the help of Yvonne's husband Russ, and a prison ministry coordinator from Mennonite Central Committee.

When providing ministry at the prison, it soon becomes obvious that most of the men have suffered losses and experienced often-severe trauma, says Yvonne. "I was hoping that this program would help to heal some of the deep wounds in their past."

The grief is often related to the



Dianne Anderson, Yvonne and Russ Powell (l-r) with grief boxes created by men in the program.

Photo by K. Yaworski

deaths of family and friends, but it also stems from other losses: loss of freedom, loss of a childhood, or traumatic incidents, said Russ.

"There is always grief in there... and we can clearly see that they're not dealing with it," said Dianne.

The program, which has so far been offered three times at Saskatoon Correctional Centre, is a

way to offer something more than just one-on-one listening, said Russ.

"It is a bigger and more comprehensive and more human way of dealing with the problem. This is very intentional and it gives them tools to work with the feelings," he said.

Those tools include visualizing and expressing grief in a variety of ways, including creative outlets

such as clay and paint, as well as journaling about feelings, and the creation of a box as a place to hold what is created throughout the process. "The box becomes where they keep their grief, and when they want to deal with it, they open it up," explained Dianne.

The results fill the team with hope. "I am just amazed by these guys and what they have done, how far they've come and the transformation that takes place," said Dianne.

She recalls one young inmate, whose 16-year-old sister committed suicide. "He had never ever dealt with the pain. It was just buried, and he's been so angry. By the end of the program, he had worked through his feelings. He made a figurine of her – he just made it so bright, so beautiful and created flowers that are there for her like a garden... saying he now just wants to let her fly. He doesn't want to hold her now, he wants to let her go. He just blossomed: it was amazing to watch the change in him."

As part of the process there are ritual moments: letters to loved

ones who have died are written and then placed ceremonially into a fire; signs of grieving are buried; and at the end, participants engage in a movement session, with fringed arm bands flying as they leap, dance and "fly" with a new-found sense of freedom.

Asked about the program's impact, Yvonne points to some of the many positive words written by participants themselves in their evaluations:

"This is the first time dealing with my trigger to disaster and its been holding me and my family from moving forward."

"It gave me a chance to look at what I need to deal with in life."

"I am now able to think about my grievances and how to work them out, rather than dwell on them with anger and sadness."

"It helped me and made me realize that I needed this and maybe if I knew about this class a long time ago and how to use these tools, maybe certain stuff in my life would have been different."

Blessings of ministry at Correctional Centre

BY KERI KOTYK

ST. ANNE'S PARISH, SASKATOON

For several years I felt a tugging at my heart – a calling if you will – to get involved in prison ministry. For that same several years, I "ran like hell" in the other direction! Why would I want to get involved with prisoners, they're bad people, right?

Wrong. I finally came to the realization that these are not bad people, but good people who have made some bad decisions, not unlike the rest of us.

I have since been involved with St. Anne's Prison Ministry team, going out to the Saskatoon Correctional Centre every five or six weeks and helping with the Catholic lay-led service.

I have enjoyed the Stations of the Cross with the inmates on Holy Thursday, had fun playing Easter Bunny and distributing chocolate bunnies to all the gentlemen, then celebrating Easter Mass with them and Bishop Don, and playing Santa Claus on Christmas Day, giving a small gift to everyone, and again, celebrating Christmas Mass with the men and with Bishop Don.

These men, some so lost and lonely, light up when they find that

people care. It isn't so much the chocolate bunny or the socks and note pad, it's that someone actually came and cared enough to visit.

When we open up the Prayers of the Faithful at our service, you know what these gentlemen pray for? Sure they pray for their families, etc., but they also pray for their enemies, for peace, for those suffering under addictions, and for us, the volunteers who come there. They are amazing men!

My favourite Bible passage is Matthew 25:31-46 about our judgment day: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, **I was in prison and you visited me.**"

I think that sometimes we forget this part about those in prison.

The blessings I get back from these gentlemen are far greater than anything I can give. I encourage anyone who is still "running like hell in the other direction" to stop,



Bishop Donald Bolen blesses worshippers during Easter Sunday Mass at the Correctional Centre.

- Photos courtesy D. Anderson

get involved and be truly blessed.

I also think that society needs to take this a step further. Instead of sending the men out on Miller Avenue with their garbage bag of all their worldly possessions to catch a bus when their sentence is done, we need to provide a home, food and support for a transition period for each one of them. Many have nowhere to go, and thus, return to their old lives, the lives that brought them to the Correctional Centre in the first place.

For more information about ways to assist with prison ministry contact Dianne Anderson, diocesan coordinator of Restorative Ministry at (306) 659-5845.



Volunteers donned bunny ears and Easter bonnets to deliver chocolate rabbits to all the prisoners on Easter Sunday.



The Stations of the Cross were prayed outdoors at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre during Holy Week. - Photos courtesy D. Anderson

Messages from prisoners at Saskatoon Correctional Centre about the work of Restorative Ministry (names have been withheld)

"I am writing this letter to tell you how much Dianne Anderson has helped me get through this time in jail. She has given me guidance and spiritual strength with her wisdom, faith, and unconditional love for us all. She makes so many inmates smile and have a new outlook on how we treat each other, and staff, everybody, but most important, ourselves and our family relationships on the street, outside of prison. She gives me hope I have never quite known before."

"What does it mean to me for Dianne Anderson to come into the Correctional Centre to see us inmates? For me it is a sign that someone cares and gives me hope and the strength to forgive and stay alive in here. Before I started to go to chapel, I felt depressed, upset, and I felt that life wasn't worth living anymore. I go to chapel to open up to God and now the thoughts of ending my life are gone. My girlfriend noticed that I have changed. If there was no one to come and spend time with us, there would be no peace in the Correctional. Dianne has shown us to move forward, to forgive, and she has helped us heal in our hearts. I thank the chaplains and Dianne for coming in to help us. Thanks so much for helping me change my life."

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