

Caritas

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everlasting love: a ministry of the Spokane Providence Associates



Irene (left) and Christy proudly show off their collages.



Denise has a new take on life.



By Kate Vanskike Smith, PA

Jane fled California with a husband who was wanted by the law. Grace has considered adding a law degree to her list of college accomplishments. Carol is celebrating the recent birth of her second son, while Irene is expanding a homeopathy business. Carrie has finished her first year at a community college. And Jessica is beginning a new life in Spokane by avoiding the drugs and promiscuity that pervaded her former life.*

These women are very different and yet very much the same. They all are victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, mental illness, chemical dependency — or a combination of these things — and are taking their first steps toward healing and fulfillment by participating in transitional programs in Spokane.

They have another thing in common: they have accepted the invitation of Providence Associates in Spokane to come away for a day of spiritual renewal and experience God's everlasting love. → →

**Some names have been changed to protect the women's privacy.*

INSIDE:

A safe place for women



Sister serves time for SOA protest



Upper Room ministry

a ministry of the Spokane Providence Associates

*Rachel writes
about her
artistic gifts.*



*Karla enjoys time
in the garden.*

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In April 2001, Providence Associates Mary Ann Wilharm and Becky Ward, along with then-PA candidate Susan Keyes, attended the Northwest Catholic Women's Conference in Seattle. Two of them had a rare opportunity to talk with Edwina Gateley, one of the conference's keynote speakers.

"Edwina had said that day was going to change our lives," remembers Becky. "She had also shared about her retreat work with the street women of Chicago and it struck a chord with me. I volunteer at Miryam's House, one of the transitional programs for women in Spokane, and for the last five years I've wanted to give the women something more, something spiritual. Retreats were the answer!"

Mary Ann and Susan agreed. When the three returned to Spokane, they presented their ideas to the associates' group, began securing funds and visited the transitional programs, inviting women to a retreat where they would be pampered, fed, encouraged, supported and loved.

There would be no paper plates and boxed food at this retreat. Instead, the associates purchased glassware, donated silverware, brought formal tablecloths and prepared a feast of spectacular homemade food. This became standard fare for the retreats, where women often comment they feel like they're eating at the finest restaurant in town and being treated like royalty.

"That was precisely the point," says Mary Ann. "We wanted it to be a day they'd remember for a long time ... a day that made them feel special."

The daylong retreats follow the theme "I have loved you with an everlasting love," (Jeremiah 31:3) and include rituals and blessings as well as a session on developing a personal statement of mission and purpose. There are also hearth-stones, collages, journaling and a number of other opportuni-

ties for the participants to share what's going on in their lives and to connect with other women who face similar struggles. Several months later, the women are invited to a follow-up retreat to share how God is working in their lives.

Jessica, whose past is full of destruction and dismay, attended the follow-up retreat with a new outlook on life demonstrated by fresh, new attire.

"I had never felt I was worth having new clothes so I would buy 'hobo' clothes at second-hand stores," she shares. "But after the first retreat, I realized I was worth new clothes, so I went and bought myself the kind of things I'd always wanted to wear." She adds, "I appreciate the retreats and the Providence Associates—love just oozes out of you."

Grace, a talented career woman whose life was interrupted by severe depression, heard about the retreats and attended both the initial and the follow-up retreat.

"Both retreats were life-altering events," she says. At the first retreat, where participants wrote out their personal purpose and accompanying goals, Grace determined that she would pursue avenues to seek justice for children. She also made the decision to put Christ at the center of her life again.



Editor's note:
Dixie Hromcik is a new Providence Associate in Great Falls. The photograph in the last issue of *Caritas* was misidentified.



Sharon writes her reflections.

Rachel shares about her collage as Susan Keyes, PA, listens.



The retreats “reaffirmed my faith and encouraged me to entrust my cares to the Lord,” Grace remembers. “They brought everything together and reinforced to me that God has a plan for me. I just have to be receptive to that plan.”

While some aspects of the retreats call for great introspection and self-evaluation, others are as simple as pulling a card from a bag. Each card has a word on it (joy, rest, sparkle, accept, etc.) and a beautiful handwritten note on the inside, explaining what that word truly means and how the recipient can put it into practice in her life. These cards are written and designed by Barbara Cox, a Providence Associate from Seattle, who says she prays over the cards as she prepares them. Providentially, each woman draws the card with the message she needs for that period in her life. Often, as the women share their reactions to the cards, their responses are the same: “I can’t believe I got this card. This is exactly what I’ve been struggling with.”

As simple as it is, the card activity is one of the most powerful demonstrations of Providence to the women. They learn early in the day that God planned for them to be at the retreat and that He has a purpose for them.

“I was very vulnerable last year,” Denise remembers. “I was afraid of women and did not trust them. I didn’t want to be a part of anything other women were a part of. But when it came time to draw a card from the bag, my card said, ‘Join. Join other women and be proud to be a woman.’”

Denise continues, “Lo and behold, I’ve learned to do just that in the months since the retreats. I spoke at

a press conference about domestic violence, participated in a candlelight vigil walk, (have) taken part in a women’s group and spoken at a women’s tea.”

It is equally amazing to watch the participants as they cut words and photos from magazines to create their own unique collages — an activity that allows them to use creativity to express the transitions in their lives. Carol’s collage represented the miracle of life as she contemplated the life that was growing inside her. Irene’s work portrayed her past and her future, including all the things she plans to do when she’s feeling healthy again. Christy, a quiet younger woman who was somewhat reluctant to share, created a masterpiece that represented the beauty and growth of her life. Each woman shares the story of her collage ... and each woman is reaffirmed by the accolades of all the others in the room.

“The atmosphere at the retreat was so warm and loving, it was the most passionate experience,” says Denise. “I’d never been so close to the Lord in all my life. I learned to believe He was there for me and loved me ... I felt like everything was going to be alright.”

Seeing God at work in these retreats is a feeling shared by the Providence Associates. “Seeing the retreats come together is such a wonderful story of how God plants seeds of desire in our hearts,” Becky says. “He puts puzzle pieces together to make the desire grow and bloom into His beautiful work.”

More than 30 women to date have participated in these retreats where they sample God’s handiwork. And along with bags of goodies, handcrafted items, stones, cards and memories, they return to their homes with an overwhelming sense of His everlasting love. ●

The cost to put on these retreats, including food and supplies, is \$40 per woman. Support comes from the contributions of the Providence Associates themselves plus from donations to the Sisters of Providence that are earmarked for that purpose.



celebrates four years as a safe place for women

"A place to be still and touch the self within. To heal, to mend, to learn, to stop the spin of everyday action, reaction, to gather traction and then go on ..."

Elizabeth Bryson,
WomanSpirit Center
board member

Imagine. A haven of peace, silence and beauty just 20 minutes from the hustle and bustle of Seattle where women can gather to share stories, reflect on their lives or world affairs, participate in workshops, retreats or book discussions, or simply to just be. That special place is no fantasy; it is WomanSpirit Center, a gathering place for women in Issaquah that is sponsored by the Sisters of Providence. In May, it marked four years of "creating an environment and experiences that free the spirit and deepen growth."



Driving WomanSpirit

Members of the board of WomanSpirit Center in Issaquah are (left to right in the truck bed) Cheryl Sjoblom, Margaret Botch, SP, Nicole Flemming, Kate Maughan, and Dona Taylor, SP. Others (left to right on the ground) are Claudia Haglund, Evelyn Wemhoff, Elizabeth Bryson, and Katherine Dyckman, SNJM. Not pictured are Ann Hughes and Suzan Conrad.

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"We've become known as a safe place for women," says Sister Dona Taylor, WomanSpirit Center coordinator. It is a place that is "as inclusive as possible and available to anyone who is interested in women's spirituality," adds Evelyn Wemhoff, the center's program coordinator.

Asked what makes WomanSpirit unique, the two quickly offer a list of answers. WomanSpirit is available to women of all faiths, it is smaller than many women's centers, it focuses on the feminine and women's issues; and the location – a lush, secluded spot in the heart of the busy western Washington corridor—is pretty close to being paradise. "It does not take very long to get here, but once you're here it seems to be at a great distance," Sister Dona explains. In addition, the fact that WomanSpirit offers overnight accommodations – space for five women in private rooms – also makes it unique in the Seattle area.

WomanSpirit has built a definite following and shows signs of sustaining the focus and energy with which it began. Among those signs are the endurance and broadening of its support groups. "After three and a half years, the book group is continuing," Sister Dona says, offering an example. "They started by discussing a book and now they often

end up discussing life and what's going on in their own lives and in the universe." Other support groups include groups for women in the second half of life, and women and leadership.

So, what's coming up at WomanSpirit in the months ahead? Plenty. For starters, summer is upon us, and it is a time when the center's programming focuses on retreats. Included are "live-in" retreats the first weekend of each month and "quiet Sunday" the last Sunday of each month, a day for women to journal, read, engage in quiet reflection, plus gathering and closing prayers for those who choose to participate. There also will be sessions for journaling and yoga, a contemplative retreat using eastern and western approaches to spirituality, and a Fourth of July retreat reflecting on inner freedom at a time when the country is celebrating its freedom. In August there will be a workshop on haiku as a means of healing. Also upcoming is a monthlong program for women in transition, most of them from leadership positions in religious communities across the country. WomanSpirit also offers yearly retreats for homeless women, something Evelyn and Sister Dona hope to do more frequently in the future.

Beyond that, WomanSpirit will hold its annual fundraising luncheon this fall to honor two women for their efforts to do something special for women. This year's honorees are Pat Graney, a nationally known choreographer who does pro bono work with women in prison, and Jerri Haynes, a former nurse and past president of Physicians for Social Responsibility, who spends time providing care to women in Iraq.

The fundraising for this not-for-profit center is essential. The dollars raised are added to funds provided by the Sisters of Providence, by individual donors, grants and by program fees for workshops and spiritual direction, which is available for both women and men. Suggested donations apply to most of the center's activities, with the exception of book groups, prayer groups and homeless retreats. Scholarships or acceptance of donations of less than the suggested amount are available for all activities.

The existence of a place like WomanSpirit once was a well-kept secret, but four years after it began welcoming women, word of mouth is working. The center's mailing list has grown to nearly 3,000 names and a quarterly newsletter and a website keep interested women informed. For more information on WomanSpirit, call 425-641-1527 or check it out online at www.womanspiritcenter.org. ●