



Catherine Center helps Women leaving Prison re-start their Lives

Re-entering society upon leaving prison is one of the most challenging transitions a person can face. Recidivism (return to incarceration after one's release) is a very real problem. According to the California Innocence Project and a report by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, just over 65 percent of those released from California's prison system, return within three years. That report was completed in 2012 and those numbers have changed very little in the last three years.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in San Mateo, Calif. is working to lower those rates and help women re-acclimate to society and become functioning citizens once they are released from prison.

In 2003, two Sisters of Mercy (RSMs), Sr. Marguerite Buchannan and Sr. Suzanne Toolan were visiting the incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison and noticed that the rates of recidivism were high because there was no support for men after release.

The RSMs soon became interested in helping women transition back into society. So, they teamed up with SVdP's jail chaplain, Paul Moriarty, the chair of the SVdP's Hope in Action detention committee, Roger Hagman and SVdP San Mateo's Executive Director, Lorraine Moriarty to formulate a plan.

Their plan was to establish a place where women could come once they were released from incarceration. It was to be place that would help them get back on their feet and offer the services needed to make them functioning members of society once again.

In order to execute their plan, they needed support from a couple key players. SVdP San Mateo president, Ed Watson and the SVdP San Mateo Board of Directors negotiated with and received both financial and spiritual support from RSM leadership. From there, the Catherine Center was born.

The name Catherine Center was chosen to pay homage to St. Catherine Laboure, a Vincentian saint and Catherine McCauley, the RSM founder.

The Catherine Center is a program of the SVdP San Mateo Restorative Justice Ministry and it is run by a staff comprised entirely of SVdP employees.

Often, women are referred to the center through SVdP's Restorative Justice head chaplain and the three SVdP Homeless Help Centers in the San Mateo area.

The Catherine Center accepts no government funding. It is funded entirely by private donors, grants and volunteers.

In order for a woman to come to the Catherine Center, she must meet a few qualifications. First, she must have been incarcerated at some point in her life. She must be open to the idea that a higher power exists, since the Catherine Center is a faith-based program.

“During our interview process, we look for women who are ready to make a deep change and seem willing to do the work of recovery and self-discovery,” said Vivian Clausing, Catherine Center program director. “Women also have to be willing to commit to the program for a year and suspend all romantic relationships during this time in order to focus on their own growth and recovery.

Since its inception, the Catherine Center has helped more than 80 women re-commit to living wholesome lives after incarceration.

What began as a one year program for six women has since grown through a generous gift of a building that is now used to house 10 women at a time. It also offers the space for a second-year, post-graduate Agape program.

The Catherine Center prides itself on the way that it accompanies each woman on her individual journey. In addition to housing, the Catherine Center also offers mentoring, education, therapy, spirituality and love.

The Center’s employees work to give the women the tools necessary to break the cycle of poverty and crime that may have lead them down the path to incarceration in the first place and assist them in moving up in society.

The Catherine Center helps women find jobs, supports them in the workplace and introduces them to critical resources that will aid them in the work to better themselves.

One woman can attest to the success of the Catherine Center. Her father and uncle both served time at San Quentin and she lost her brother to a drug overdose just a few years prior to her jail sentence. She had been living on the streets until she learned about Catherine Center.

Today, thanks to the Catherine Center, she is clean and sober. She has reconnected with God and her family and is in school to become a drug and alcohol counselor.

She said, “If I can help other people, I know I will be happy in life.”

The Catherine Center is a source of help and inspiration for many people.

“Catherine Center is a wonderful example of how the call to help our sisters in need can be answered by ordinary people enflamed by God’s love,” said Clausing. “Just as our women are transformed by the generosity of our volunteers, our visitors are inspired by the courage of our women. It is a privilege to witness God’s hand in people’s lives.”

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Former Catherine Center Program Director, Lizette Lim, welcomes a woman to the Catherine Center. Since this photo was taken, the rooms have been re-decorated by volunteers and are often complimented for their wonderful appearance.