

‘Strong Project Rachel ministry’ passes to new leaders

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



Project Rachel, a ministry for those who seek healing after an abortion, has built a legacy of compassion and understanding that Catherine Phillips and Helen Evans plan to continue and evolve as founder Anne Dierks retires.

“It’s time. I’m 80 years old. If I hadn’t found the perfect person, I’d still be doing it,” Dierks said. “... I feel very comfortable with the two of them and I’m ready to go.”

Phillips, who has served as director of the Respect Life Office for the Diocese of Little Rock since 2016, will oversee and work with Helen Evans, a longtime facilitator with Project Rachel, who will serve as the group’s coordinator.

“I have to thank Anne and honor her for her legacy. We do have a really strong Project Rachel ministry in our diocese because of all her many years of hard work,” Phillips said.

Moving forward, they plan to continue to find ways to grow the ministry, including an online presence and days of prayer.

“Men and women who have had a past abortive experience are suffering so much from shame and guilt,” Phillips said. “They feel the Church doesn’t care about them, they’re still oftentimes angry, they feel abandoned. Of course all of this is an outreach to direct them to the mercy of God.”

In 1989, Bishop Andrew J. McDonald asked Dierks, who served as diocesan respect life

director for 16 years, to oversee a support group for women who have had abortions. It was officially launched in 1991. Project Rachel is an official United States Conference of Catholic Bishops ministry throughout the country.

“When Bishop McDonald asked me to do this, I said, ‘What?’ I don’t know how to counsel anyone, I’m a mathematician by degree,” Dierks said.

The free confidential support group, open to all faiths, has 11-week sessions twice a year and retreats every other year.

“I just thought, ‘I don’t know about this Lord. But evidently it was what I was supposed to do.’”

Dierks has said it’s been “a miracle” to watch the Holy Spirit heal the hearts of women who have sometimes carried the pain of abortion for many years.

It was the exact healing that Helen Evans needed when she went through Project Rachel, years after her abortion in 1979.

“My first experience with abortion was actually with a friend of mine who had two abortions when I was in nursing school. One of the things that has always struck me about that is being best friends, we shared everything, everything, but never ever spoke about the abortion after the abortion. Never. And that is something that happens so much ... it’s like they lock it away and throw away the key because it’s too painful to talk about it,” Evans said. “Then of course, years later I had an abortion. It was a real spiraling out of control for me, a real painful time. Immediately after having my abortion I was in a hotel room that night, I remember myself just sobbing at the fact that I had taken my baby’s life ... I started numbing myself with alcohol. It was a really difficult time.”

She attended Project Rachel in 1998 and continued assisting with retreats. Her friend also, years later, during a visit from London, attended a Project Rachel retreat, receiving healing from her then three abortions and several miscarriages.

“They don’t realize what’s causing that anxiety and the depression and the addictions, going from relationship to relationship,” Evans said. “They don’t understand even if they have children how there’s difficulty in communicating with your kids, spouse or boyfriend.”

Evans, a parishioner at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Little Rock and a retired psychiatric nurse, said last fall was the first time men attended Project Rachel.

“I want to see men come to Project Rachel and receive the healing they need,” she said, as well as more diversity. “It’s something that as a psychiatric nurse that I know, African American people do not seek help for mental illnesses. And I think this is sort of in that umbrella. It’s hard to get them in there, but I think that’s something that I hope can happen.”

Phillips, a parishioner at Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Booneville, said she wants Project Rachel to meet diverse needs, including more Hispanic outreach, outreach to men and broadening the areas they serve throughout the state.

The ministry held two Day of Prayer and Healing retreats during Advent and Lent, which offered healing and also insight into the variety of healing Project Rachel offers. The women also hope to have a stronger online presence with a private online community for continued

healing.

“One thing we really need to strengthen is the way people are able to access information and make first contact with us,” Phillips said, who attended a USCCB-sponsored training for Project Rachel. Phillips said the ministry is crucial, as statistics say one in four women is likely to have an abortion by age 45.

While the two women are strong pro-life advocates, they also share the pain of loss. Phillips’ husband John died Oct. 28 and Evans’ husband Grover died Dec. 3.

“We’re definitely sisters on this journey of grief and yes, grief has a lot of commonality no matter if it’s the death of a spouse, or a child, born or unborn ... people do grieve in different ways. Post-abortive mother(s) oftentimes they feel like it’s forbidden grief and not allowed to grieve for their child,” Phillips said, who also lost her son Daniel, 19, a seminarian, after a car accident in 2012.