

Chicago *Empowering Homeless Women*

From the Field

The Power of Shared Stories



By Cathy Reid

In April, I was a facilitator on the Ignatian Spirituality Project's overnight retreat for homeless women in Chicago. I was glad that I got to have this final experience of the overnight retreat before the end of my JV year; the overnight retreat is the real center of ISP's work.

The retreats are always incredibly powerful, intense experiences: 12 to 14 women from different Chicago homeless shelters gather together to share their stories and find hope and strength through building a sense of community with one another. It sounds so simple when I describe it, and yet it's genuinely life-changing.

That weekend, I was on a retreat with 13 homeless women, all of whom had been sexually abused as a child by a male relative, babysitter, teacher, or some other man she felt should have been in the position of a protector.

Ultimately, I know that the retreat was a deeply cathartic experience for the women. Many of them had never before talked about their experiences as children, or the fact that many of them know that their daughters have had the same experiences. Several of them named as the grace of the retreat the fact that they had found a language with which to speak about their experiences; that meant they could heal. They shared with and drew strength from each other. One woman said that she had always thought, before, that her body just existed for men's pleasure. "But now I know," she said, "that my body belongs to me, not to anyone else. I can say 'no.'" Her sense of empowerment was contagious.

There is always at least one story that stays with me from any retreat. After this retreat, I know that I'm carrying all of these women with me now.  

This excerpt of a reflection was written by Cathy Reid, Chicago, who is working with the Ignatian Spirituality Project, a Jesuit Ministry offering spiritual retreats to end homelessness. Visit www.jesuitvolunteers.org/themagazine for more retreat stories.



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