

Needs & Deeds: Women on the margins find opportunities for healing

by [MELISSA HOWELL](#)

Published: Mon, July 16, 2018 5:00 AM



Chasity Becraft interacts with Sara Spencer as women engage in a labyrinth exercise during the Ignatian Spirituality Project. The program offers men and women who are

66° Q

The oppressive June heat outside the Catholic Pastoral Center in northwest Oklahoma City is still and thick as I make my way inside the building. As the doors open, a rush of cool air falls on me like a balm. It's a respite from the heat and for the women I've come to see — it's a respite, a shelter, from a world of struggle.

In the dining hall, 10 women and a few volunteers are immersed in ebullient chatter over lunch. They are women from all walks of life who share the immense challenges of addiction and homelessness. And they share a common will to meet those challenges with spiritual healing.

They are Oklahoma City's first participants in an Ignatian Spirituality Project retreat that took place June 2-3 with a follow-up reunion June 23 at the Catholic Pastoral Center.

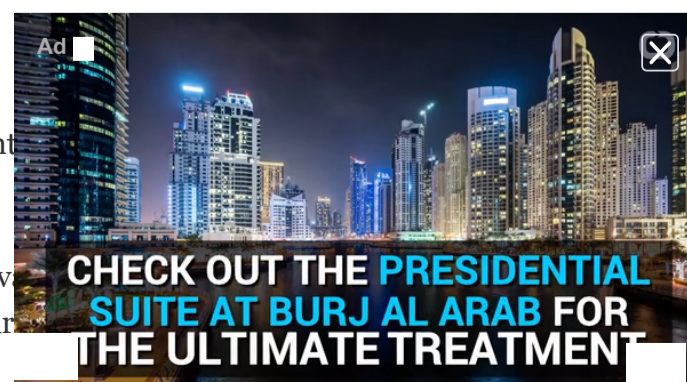
The Ignatian Spirituality Project, or ISP, is a nationwide organization that provides retreat experiences for men and women who are homeless and in recovery from addiction. The retreats are based on the principles of the 500-year-old spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius and the 12-step recovery movement.

"If they are doing something that indicates that they really want to stop the cycle, whether they've been there for 20 years or for two weeks, that's who we identify as someone who can benefit from this. What we try to bring in the retreat is 'radical hope,'" said Sherry Alexander, founder of the Oklahoma City chapter of ISP. "Why a retreat? Yes, they need food. Yes, they need clothing. Absolutely! But all that will come and go if they don't have hope."

What it is, what it's not

Alexander said the program is completely ecumenical. Similar to the 12-step program, retreatants find "power," whatever that may be.

"This is not a preaching retreat. We're not here to step in anybody's religious toes. This is not a vocation retreat. We're bringing them time to experience God's love and do it in a sense of community that has loving and caring at its core," she said.



As a foundation for the program, the 12-step program with the principles of Ignatian Spirituality “seek to inspire greater knowledge of one's self and one's relationship with God as an agent of change within one's life,” according to the organization's website.

This is accomplished through reflection on the participant's life, seeking reconciliation of past wounds, connection to community and moving from self-hate to love and isolation to engagement.

“One of the sections may be ‘fear versus trust,’ ” Alexander said. “We give them an opportunity to sit with that. We give them an opportunity to journal about that. We give them an opportunity to express what they feel comfortable expressing out loud within the community of the weekend. So, it's not saying that you have to do this or you have to do that. It's just giving you time to sit with where you are.

“We are not trying to fix anybody. We're not trying to preach to them. We're not trying to force them to make any kind of decision. We are there to love them right where they are. And giving them the opportunity to experience God's love right where they are right now. And we have found that having done this for 20 years, this is healing. And it's a great step for making good decisions in your life – not decisions out of fear, not decisions out of shame.”

Weekend retreats typically take place from Saturday morning to Sunday afternoon. Themes may include: recovering our story, fear and trust, healing of memories, time in nature and experiences of prayer. Prayer during the weekend includes attitudes and practices that create hope. Food and lodging is provided included individual rooms for the participants.

In addition to the one in Oklahoma City, ISP conducts retreats in 30 cities across the United States and one in Canada.

Path toward healing

Many of the women who attended the retreat found the experience more emotional and revealing than expected.

For Chasity Becraft, 35, the retreat offered her a sense of family and a heightened sense of spirituality.

“I made sisters. I made a family. People who I can call on whenever situation happens. I don't have many friends who are female,” she said. “God has just showed up in my life. I got a job. My son is back in my life. I'm being a leader to two other women and other people. I've gotten so much joy and peace in learning to believe in (God) because he believes in me. I've been feeling like he wasn't there for a while – for a really long time. And I've been searching and this retreat was what I needed.”

The retreat was a means of examining and releasing longtime burdens for Angie Lawson, 51.

CPAP Makers Scrambling After New Snoring Fix Unveiled
Purch Expert | Sponsored

[Read Next Story >](#)

“It's just been wonderful! I had the time of my life. I really did,” she said. “I was just blown away spiritual nourishment that I needed. I've started going to Mass again. It put me in touch with God. I feel really blessed. It feels like (God) personally reached out to help me. I had some things that happened to me in the past, and I think I got some real healing from that. And then I left it here when I left.”

Regina Hardeman, 48, said that peace was the thing she took away from the weekend.

“When I got here ... I was able to release some things that I was needing to release. When I went into my room and sat on the bed, I just fell asleep. I've never been anywhere where I just went to sleep like that,” she said. “When I left here, I was more at peace. And I don't think I've ever been this much at peace. When I left I thought, ‘Man, I really needed that.’ Since then, I've been able to share my testimony.”

While the program has produced life-changing results, Alexander says it may not be beneficial for everyone.

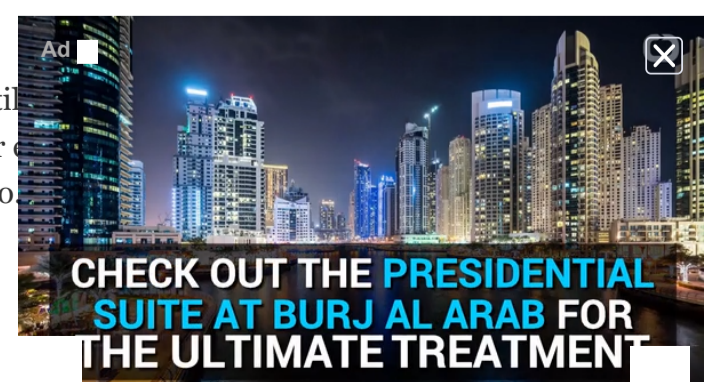
“Not everyone is in a place where they can deal with listening to others' stories or deal with silence,” she said. But Oklahoma City is showing itself as a place where this kind of program can flourish.

“Since some cities have been doing this for 30 years, I see this kind of rooting here and becoming a part of the community,” Alexander said.

And by all accounts, the initial retreat shows promise of attaining that hope.

“Some cities open with three (retreatants) who are interested. We started with 12, and we are still growing. We came from Chicago to help us do our first retreat ... left saying this was the best retreat had ever had in Oklahoma City. We have that sense of community and hospitality. That's what I want to tap into.”

AT A GLANCE



Ignatian Spirituality Project Retreat

Ignatian Spirituality Project began in 1998 with the idea that the spiritual life was a source of hope amid deep discouragement. Its retreats draw upon the 500-year-old tradition of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius and the 12-step recovery movement.

The network encompasses 30 cities across the US and Canada and includes over 800 volunteers serving over 2,000 retreatants a year.

How to help

The organization is looking for drivers and retreat volunteers. Contact Alexander at ISPoklahoma@outlook.com for more information. For monetary donations, go to www.ISPretreats.org and select Oklahoma.

MELISSA HOWELL

Melissa Howell is a 1987 graduate of the University of Central Oklahoma. Following graduation she moved to Kansas City and began working for The Lenexa News, a small suburban weekly. In 1988, she went at the Kansas City Star as a reporter and...

[Read more >](#)

[Contact Us](#) | [Terms of Use](#)



© 2006-2019 [GateHouse Media, LLC](#). All rights reserved

CPAP Makers Scrambling After New Snoring Fix Unveiled

Purch Expert | Sponsored

[Read Next Story >](#)

