

Finding healing after an abortion in the Archdiocese of Baltimore

Therese Hessler stared at the positive pregnancy test in utter shock. She had been in a new relationship following a failed marriage and never expected to find herself pregnant.

Even though the 31-year-old owner of a Baltimore-based advertising and media agency had grown up in a Catholic family that was active in the pro-life movement and although she was a former participant in the March for Life and other pro-life causes, abortion was the first option that leapt into her mind.

“I had a foggy, robotic response of just wanting to ‘handle it,’ ” Hessler remembered. “There was really no moment of consequential thought. My brain just shut down and I didn’t process that this went against everything I ever grew up believing in.”

At six weeks and six days into the pregnancy and with the assent of the baby’s father, Hessler underwent the procedure. Almost immediately, she said, she was crushed by the knowledge that her decision resulted in the taking of her unborn child’s life.

“You almost feel like a darkness has been let in,” remembered Hessler, an alumna of Towson University who majored in mass communications.

For months, Hessler found it difficult to get out of bed every morning and even more difficult to put a smile on her face around her friends and family. She was experiencing what she described as pain not unlike that experienced by those with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Hessler finally reached out for help by contacting Project Rachel, a pro-life ministry of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. She began attending monthly meetings with other women who had undergone abortion and she spoke with representatives of a pro-life pregnancy center in Laurel.

In October, Hessler participated in a Rachel's Vineyard retreat in Baltimore where she attended a memorial service for her child, gave her child the name "Rowan" and experiencing forgiveness through the sacrament of reconciliation.

"The memorial service and reconciliation were the two last things I really needed to have that peace replace everything I had been carrying," Hessler said. "Confession is not a place of judgment. It's a place of healing where you can really feel God's love."

In the Holy Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis, Hessler is hoping more women who have undergone abortion will look to the Catholic Church for help. In this special year, the pontiff has granted every priest in the world the authority to absolve women for the sin of abortion – permission bishops had already given to priests in the U.S. for many years, but that had been lacking in other parts of the world where only bishops could absolve women who had abortions.

Since the pope's announcement, calls to Project Rachel in Baltimore have nearly doubled, according to Johanna Coughlin, coordinator of the pro-life ministry.

"We offer a confidential, prayer-centered response to women and men suffering after abortion," Coughlin said.

Project Rachel maintains a network of clergy, licensed counselors and volunteers who are trained to provide one-on-one spiritual and psychological support for those who are suffering from the trauma of abortion. Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreats see a wide range of people from all walks of life, ages and religions, Coughlin said. A daylong retreat for women, "Come to the Water," is also offered.

"People of faith are able to come to terms with the idea that Christ forgives them, but they often can't forgive themselves," Coughlin said. "We help them find that forgiveness."

Participants come to Rachel's Vineyard suffering from nightmares, anxiety and depression, Coughlin said.

Hessler was transformed by her experience at Rachel's Vineyard. She reconnected with her Catholic faith and began attending Mass at Sacred Heart of Jesus in

Highlandtown, a Redemptorist-led faith community she still attends along with other Catholic churches in the Washington archdiocese where she relocated six weeks ago.

Attending Rachel's Vineyard inspired Hessler to begin a nonprofit pro-life organization of her own called Rowan's Gift that supports foster homes, shelters, orphanages, pregnancy centers and more.

In the end, Hessler said, the child she lost to abortion saved her life.

"She showed me how to find peace and direction and come back to God," Hessler said. "That was Rowan's Gift."

Upcoming retreats

A Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreat will be held in Baltimore Feb. 26-28 and a Come to the Waters day retreat will be offered April 2 in Baltimore. Click [here](#) or call (410) 625-8491 for more information or to register or to connect with a counselor.

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