

Chaplain Creates a “Bereavement in Custody” Program for Incarcerated Teens and Young Adults

Catherine Conneally-Salazar has been a youth/young adult prison Chaplain in California for 16 years. Early on in this position she saw the need for helping the youth cope with unresolved or ongoing grief issues. Many lost a loved one or friend while incarcerated or even before they came into the system. They had no means of publicly or personally grieving, so they stuffed the feelings down.

It was only a matter of time before these feelings surfaced in negative ways through fighting or self-injurious behavior (especially in the female population). Catherine sought out the help of the Behavior Health Team and found that they only dealt with loss in one-to-one settings and only if the individual was willing to bring it up. “There was no group bereavement support and even if there was, most of the inmates did not ‘want their business out there’ for others to use against them,” Catherine reflects, “I found myself in need of some tools and meaningful rituals to help them process and deal with the grief.”

The First Step: Memorial Services

The first thing Catherine did was to start offering Memorial Services. She fashioned a service based on the “Rite of Funerals” in the Rites Handbook of the Catholic Church and tailored it for a juvenile population. The young person may choose the songs and readings, write a eulogy or dedication, and invite friends or family members who are approved for visiting.

During the Service, each person who comes may say a few words of consolation to the bereaved person. It helps those attending as much as it helps the person for whom the Service is held. Sometimes the service occurs many years after the death simply because the person had never been invited to deal with the pain before.

Other Program Tools That Emerged

- **Resources.** Catherine gathered various resources she had on the topic of grief, one of them being a program called TAG (Teen Age Grief). She came up with a list of questions that the inmate could use as a starting point for journaling. She wrote several handouts for them and provided a journal if needed. See the Chaplain resource page for downloadable files: <http://www.cacatholic.org/restorejustice/chaplains>.
- **Wall of Remembrance in the Chapel.** In 2011 Catherine lost both her parents within three months. She needed a way to feel close to them during her workday. She put up photos and invited others to add their own pictures or names of loved ones written on index cards to her display. One of the youth drew angels that were put above each name. The group lit a Sanctuary Candle each time they added a new name to the wall. Catherine also added a prayer of consolation to the display.
- **Day of the Dead Altar:** Building on the Mexican tradition of honoring the dead in the month of November, Catherine brought in materials and made a large Altar in the vestibule. The altar stayed up for the month. Then she made a smaller altar on one of the permanent side altars in the Chapel. She also had the youth attending services throughout the month add the names of their loved ones to a list that they put in a special binder brought in during the opening procession at the weekly Communion

Service and placed on the side altar.

- **Memorial Boxes.** Using a cardboard shoebox, the young people cut out pictures/words from magazines that reminded them of their loved one and glued them to the box. They also had an option to make a memorial collage. The youths could keep the boxes or collages in their rooms.
- **Birthday Party/Celebration of Life.** Often times the anniversary of the loved one's birthday is another difficult date for the youth to deal with. Catherine came up with the idea of having a "birthday party/celebration of life" in the person's honor. She purchased some food and a cake. The inmate could choose a couple of friends to come to the Chapel and share in the meal. Catherine asked the inmate to make a birthday card for the deceased person and bring it to the celebration. The celebration might include some music that reminded the inmate of his/her loved one.

Catherine has been very open with the youth about her own grief process and feels it is important to model for them how to face the times of sorrow that arise throughout the journey of remembering and letting go.

There are many other situations in the inmates' lives that need grief healing such as the loss of a parent who was never there for them, although they may be alive; the loss of innocence and sense of self-worth when growing up with abuse of all kinds; the loss of a "normal childhood" because of poverty, violence and neglect. "I have come to believe that unresolved grief is the driving force that leads people to make the choices they do (whether incarcerated or not)," Catherine says. She believes that creating sacred spaces and rituals where people can begin to look at and feel their feelings of loss and then bring them to God for healing is the single most important thing a Prison Chaplain can do in his/her ministry.

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