

WFWP AK: Joyce Raynor shared the journey that led her to create her nonprofit

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"True reconciliation does not consist in merely forgetting the past," Nelson Mandela.

It is never easy to forgive someone who has caused you great pain and suffering, and it can take a long time for your heart to heal. Faced with a devastating loss, one remarkable woman decided to dedicate her life to supporting others who experienced similar suffering and in the process healed her own heart as well as the hearts of hundreds of victims and their family members.

On Thursday, January 24th, the Women's Federation for World Peace of Arkansas held its first meeting of the year at the William F. Laman Library in North Little Rock. Our featured speaker was Joyce Raynor, one of our HerStory awardees in 2017. She is the founder and executive director of the Center for Healing Hearts and Spirits, a nonprofit that serves victims and survivors of violent crime.

Joyce movingly shared the personal journey that led her to create this nonprofit, which began with a tragedy 18 years ago. She lost her son to gang violence when a gang member came to their home and shot her son sitting outside. Realizing that she was not alone in this experience as several other families had faced a situation similar to hers, she felt she had to do something.

Joyce, who had been serving as vice president of the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce at the time, felt called by God to set up a nonprofit to help others through their grief at having lost a loved one

to violence. However, she faced the challenge of leaving her job and not having a source of income.

She told the president of the Chamber about her intention and when he realized he could not persuade her otherwise he decided to help Joyce. He guaranteed to pay Joyce her regular salary and all her benefits for three years while she got her nonprofit off the ground. She said that without this she could not have started. Several businesses from the Chamber pitched in to help her nonprofit by making substantial donations to her work. In her work at the Chamber she had raised over \$3 million in grants for minority businesses.

Joyce said in her remarks that it took a long, long time to come to be able to forgive her son's murderer. She said that only through prayer and God's grace could she do so. However, it does not mean the hurt and scars are gone from what happened. She believes that those who do such acts of violence should not just easily get out but should serve their debt to society for the crime they committed.

Joyce has helped hundreds, maybe even a thousand or more families over the years to work through their grief and come to a resolution of their situation at having lost a loved one. She does this through individual counseling and group counseling.

Joyce went on to describe some of the ways her nonprofit helps people. Through the Center for Healing Hearts and Spirits, she intervenes in domestic abuse cases involving all kinds of abuse. She goes to the prisons, even the maximum security state prisons, to hold life skills classes.

There are a number of projects that benefit youths. She provides scholarships for students to continue their education and offers returning students school supplies at the beginning of every year. She also does anti-tobacco education and advocacy to direct youth away from using tobacco products.

Another serious challenge facing the community that Joyce has been involved with is human trafficking in Central Arkansas. Her center helps rape victims in reporting cases to the police, with counseling and also providing two sets of clothes for a woman or young girl to leave the hospital with because most times the clothes they were wearing is kept as evidence.

In addition to the center, Joyce serves on a number of commissions and committees that support the city of Little Rock. She co-founded the Women's Council on African-American Affairs, among other things.

Joyce ended her talk by saying that at the end of the day she is always tired but that it is a good tired knowing she has helped people who are really in need. Inspired by her message, members of the audience actively engaged in a QandA session on the topic. Attendees included notable women active in religious, political and business circles.