

Octogenarian brings God to inmates

Sandy Martino leads monthly Bible studies at Henrico jail

KRISTEN BYRD
Special to The Catholic Virginian

Cane in hand, 89-year-old Sandy Martino walks into Henrico County's Regional West Jail. Accompanied by her partner in prayer, Mike Michalowicz, she has navigated these halls for 17 years. Once a month, he picks her up at the Sunrise Assisted Living Center, Richmond, and the pair facilitate Bible study sessions with the female and male inmates.

While making her way through a series of locked doors and corridors to the meeting room, Martino refuses Michalowicz's arm but stops to rest as a group of middle schoolers on a field trip scurry past.

Born in 1929 in Washington, D.C., Martino looks younger than her 89 years. In her family, service was almost automatic. Her father, Major General Melvin J. Maas, was a decorated veteran of World Wars I and II and also represented a district from Minnesota in the U.S. House of Representatives for eight terms.

"I think if you're a Christian, you have a need to serve," she said, "It's a basic need. You want to bring God to other people. God is in your life, and he isn't something you can hold inside. You have to share."

Martino has been participating in Bible study programs since she was a child. She found the Bible endlessly entertaining and never tired of reading and studying it. She was particularly fascinated with the stories of the Old Testament – the spectacle and the drama that could beat any Hollywood blockbuster.

"Cecil B. DeMille used to love the Bible, you know," she said, referring to the producer and director of the movie, "The Ten Commandments."

A member of St. Bridget Parish, Richmond, Sandy noticed an ad one day in the church bulletin asking for volunteers to start a Bible study group in the jail. She immediately felt it was her calling to join. That's when she met Michalowicz.

Seventeen years ago, he had befriended a Sudanese refugee, one of the tens of thousands of so-called "Lost Boys" who escaped genocide in Africa in hopes of finding a better life in the United States. This particular man was here with his sister. Michalowicz gave him rides to and from Mass at St. Ann Church in Richmond and talked about life and God. The two became close friends.

But the siblings were having a hard time making ends meet, and the man committed a crime that resulted in jail time.

"I started writing him a series of letters to jail, trying to encourage him and tell him that I'd help him. He never got them. They all came back unopened. It broke my heart," Michalowicz said. "That encouraged me to work harder. That's when I made the call to the jail."

He worked with the Henrico County Sheriff's Office and the Diocese of Richmond to pioneer the Bible study program.

'They bring me closer to God'

Together, Martino and Michalowicz, 50, have met hundreds of inmates over the years. While neither of them has ever slept in a cell, they connect on a personal level with those who have. Listening to them, one realizes they don't see them as prisoners, but as people with their own stories, their own reasons for living behind bars. The prison ministers realize how thin a line divides them and those to whom they minister.

"We are only one mistake away from sitting right next to them," said Michalowicz, who has been a senior auditor manager at Bon Secours for 23 years.

It has been three months since the duo has been to the jail, the summer having pulled Michalowicz away on family obligations, and the inmates have missed them. Some even asked the sheriff's department to call to check on Martino to make sure she was OK.

She didn't know about that, but she smiles wide when Michalowicz tells her. Instead of accepting the compliment, Martino turned it back to the prisoners.

"They bring me closer to God. I see so much love within the inmates. We are there to help them and to teach them, but the fact is they are teaching us," she said.

This is a running theme with her: She gets more than she gives, is taught more than she teaches.

Martino is positive but realistic.

"There are a lot of people in jail who don't want



Mike Michalowicz and Sandy Martino minister monthly to inmates at Henrico County's Regional West Jail. Martino, 89, says, "You want to bring God to other people."

(Photo provided)

anything to do with us. You're not going to reach everyone, but if you can make a difference, you have to try," she said. "There's nothing worse than being in jail and having no hope of anything. That's what we try to bring. Hope to a hopeless situation. Hope and love."

Praying and listening

There are about 1,000 inmates at Henrico West. The ministers would be happy whether just one person or 100 people showed up. The women's meeting is first, and one of the women has been in the jail for a while. She was supposed to be released, but her time was extended.

A cross hanging from her neck, she is happy to see Martino and Michalowicz again. He hands out missals and opens the meeting with prayer.

"When we pray together, we are on holy ground," he said.

Then they go around the room and share something by which they are blessed and something with which they are struggling. This is a difficult exercise, as many of the women, according to Martino, feel resentment about being in jail, especially if they are also mothers. The mother of five children, Martino connects with the inmates who are mothers.

"I can't imagine what they're going through, to be away from their children," she said. "But I can listen to them, and sometimes that's all we need to do."

Martino said meeting mothers is the saddest part because society puts "pressure on women to be pure and be responsible for their children." When they fall short, she said, they feel like they failed their children, which is a whole other kind of jail.

"The biggest thing isn't forgiveness of others, it's forgiving themselves," she said. "Once they can forgive themselves, they can forgive others."

As they go around the room, it is clear that forgiveness is not easy, especially in the eye-for-an-eye world the prisoners are used to. Still, Martino manages to add humor and light to the meeting.

"I'm blessed to be here. Every day is a good day as long as I get up in the morning and know who I am," she said, chuckling. "It takes less muscles to laugh than to cry, and it sure makes you feel better."

Nothing to hide

The sessions follow a loose itinerary of prayer, sharing, reading the Gospel, interpreting it, then praying again. Sometimes they don't even get to the Bible; they just listen and talk. One woman said she's been trying to find a way to fit God back in her life, but is unsure how.

"You're here," Martino said. "That means something."

The meeting ends with the praying of the Our Father and hugs.

After the women have been escorted out, the men enter. They are wearing tan scrubs in contrast to the women's light blue ones.

"I think the men are actually more open, and they are maybe a little more honest. They don't feel they have anything to hide," Martino said.

This time, however, the men seemed reluctant, unwilling to share in the beginning. The Gospel reading focused on Mark 9:38-48, which includes the admonition: "And if your hand should be your downfall, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life crippled, than to have two hands and go to hell, into the fire that can never be put out. And if your foot should be your downfall, cut it off; it is better for you enter into life lame, than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye should be your downfall, tear it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell."

With its violent, powerful image, the passage resonated with the men. They opened up about their struggles, many of which mirrored the Gospel, e.g., hands that were used for violence, eyes that may have lusted, feet that may have been pointed too long in the wrong direction. At its core, Michalowicz said, the passage is saying, "Anything that's keeping you from being completely obedient to God, you need to put it to the side to achieve peace."

'One day at a time'

Addiction is a common thread here, as several of the men talked about their drug or alcohol dependency. It's the two prison ministers' mission to replace addiction – in all forms – with a love of God, and replace the desire for revenge with forgiveness.

Martino mentioned the "one day at a time" mantra and said the most important step is believing God could restore anyone. It's an uphill fight but a winnable one. When one prisoner mentioned how high the recidivism rate is — nationally, according to the National Institute of Justice, more than 75 percent of those released will be re-arrested within five years — Martino replied, "Then you have to fight harder."

She and Michalowicz also make sure the inmates are aware of various programs to help them find clothes, jobs, and housing once they are released. As much as they love the prisoners, they don't want to see them again.

The men state their desire to change, to leave jail and never come back, to be good fathers and husbands and sons. Many, like the women, can't forgive themselves for their crimes against society or their sins against their loved ones.

One man, who carries his own Bible full of notes, said that nothing in flesh was perfect, that all people fall short, but that if he wants a life outside of jail, he has to learn to forgive.

Michalowicz reminded the men that "Jesus picks the most imperfect people to do his ministry," mentioning Peter and Paul, and noting that Peter denied Christ three times but was still chosen to build the Church.

No judgment, just help

Though on the outside nothing could look more opposite than this octogenarian holding hands with a heavily-tattooed 30-something-year-old man, inside they were the same, both children of God. There was no judgment on Martino's part, just the desire to help.

Each prisoner seemed genuinely grateful to be there. They were just two people with closed hands and open hearts.

"Her humble, kind, loving approach really has drawn inmates to her," said Michalowicz said of Martino.

She told the men and women, "You don't have to be with us here today. You chose to be." Prisoners can only go to one program during the day, and Bible study competes with GED classes, the law library, the canteen, and other programs. Still, these men and women chose Bible study, which is open to members of all faiths, over their other options.

"You can learn from every experience you have," Martino continued. "There must be something you can learn from jail." The men nodded in agreement.

As the hour-long meeting concluded, the group prayed the Our Father and the Serenity Prayer — a staple of most 12-step addiction recovery meetings. Preparing to be ushered to their cells, the men thanked Martino and Michalowicz.

The couple plans to continue their ministry as long as they can; this is their passion.

"You get so full, you have to give some, or you'll burst," Martino said, "That's what life is: you either give or you take. I hope I don't take too much from life. I hope I give more."