

Julie's story

When Julie found herself pregnant at sixteen, she assumed that she and her boyfriend would get married and live happily ever after. Instead he handed her an envelope containing \$120 cash and the address of an abortionist. The year was 1956.

'I spoke to no one else about my pregnancy,' recalls Julie. 'I carried on as if everything was fine. On the day of the abortion I caught the train to my appointment, clutching my envelope of cash, what seemed like such a huge amount of money. I was scared and I was alone. The rough treatment of the abortionist and his 'staff' did nothing to allay my fears. I was sent home with some sanitary pads and a number to ring if the bleeding didn't stop. That was it. The abortion was over. I could get on with my life, right?'

Life did go on. Julie ended up marrying, not her boyfriend, but another young man in whom she recognised a goodness which had been lacking in the previous relationship. They had four children and forged a successful life together. Yet underneath it all Julie harboured a tragic secret. 'I was always thinking of my baby as my other children grew up. He'd be losing his first tooth now... He'd be getting his driver's license... He'd be getting married.' Instead of becoming a fading memory, the loss of her aborted child was painfully impinging upon her present.

'I have two photographs of

myself as a teenager – one taken just before my troubles began and the other taken not long after the abortion. In the first one I'm smiling with a genuine happiness and innocence. In the second I am smiling just as before – but something's different. I think the eyes give it away. There's an emptiness, a sadness that wasn't there before.'

Forty-four years after her abortion a watershed event occurred in Julie's life. For the first time she sought the help of the Church in dealing with her loss. During this period she travelled to the United States and took part in a healing retreat run by Project Rachel, specifically designed for women grieving the loss of a child through abortion. Project Rachel is named after Rachel of Rahmah in the Book of Jeremiah who weeps for her children and cannot be consoled. The Lord speaks to her saying, 'Cease your cries of mourning. Wipe the tears from your eyes. The sorrow you have shown shall have its reward. There is hope for your future.' (Jer 31:15-17) The retreat unfolded as an eight step process including reflection, memorial, reconciliation and closure. It was a profound acknowledgement of a woman's pain and the unconditional love and forgiveness of God. Here Julie was able to make peace with her child, herself, her God and was equipped with important tools to continue the inner journey. 'One day I had a powerful prayer experience. I went "looking" for my child and I

found him in Jesus' arms. He was beautiful, curly headed, laughing. I said, "Are you okay?" And I knew he was.'

Having been offered a gift of healing, Julie is now offering that gift to other Australian women by establishing Project Rachel in Australia. As a trained counsellor and working with a priest, she conducts similar retreats and offers support to post-abortive women in their journey to healing and wholeness. Julie's story is one of a number of hopeful signs today of a growing acknowledgement of the silent grief of women who have suffered an abortion. (The testimonies of some 200 such women form the basis of Melinda Tankard Reist's book *Giving Sorrow Words*, published by Duffy & Snellgrove, 2000.) It takes courage to open wounds from the past in order to treat and heal them. And yet if we don't, our grief doesn't just go away. As one Christian commentator has put it, 'If we don't transform our pain, we're sure to transmit it.' An initiative like Project Rachel is a graced opportunity for transformation and new life.

For more information about Project Rachel:
www.rachelsvineyard.org.au

