

THISTLE FARMS PROGRAM

Evening the Playing Field in Coatesville



▲ Regina Mullins speaks to parishioners of the Episcopal Church of the Trinity in Coatesville about how the Thistle Farms program changed her life.



▲ Mullins, right, and the Rev. Sherry Deets share a lighter moment.

After years lost to prostitution, drug addiction and human trafficking, years that cost her custody of her children and a relationship with her family, along with any sense of self-worth, Regina Mullins left prison for the last time in 1997 and found a home—a real home—at Thistle Farms' Magdalene House in Nashville.

She clearly recalls the day 22 years ago when she first met Thistle Farms founder and Episcopal priest Becca Stevens. Mullins was just the fifth woman to join the fledgling two-year residential program that provides housing, food, healthcare, therapy and education to women who have survived trafficking, prostitution and addiction—at no charge. She knew most of the other women in the program from the streets or prison.

Mullins had serious reservations about entering a program run by a priest in “a black shirt and white collar” who would be “draggin’ me to confession all the time.” What she encountered instead was a barefoot young woman wearing cutoff shorts and a midriff shirt, carrying her 2-year-old son in her arms.

"That day," Mullins told parishioners at Episcopal Church of the Trinity in Coatesville one recent Sunday morning following the service, "she said to me—and I take it with me everywhere I go because I know it's true because of the people I met before and the people I will meet—she said, 'Regina, if there's a line between priests and prostitutes, it's a very, very thin line.' And that floored me. Because at that moment, somebody made the playing field even.

"It didn't matter what you'd done. It didn't matter what anybody had done. What it meant was that everybody—it doesn't mean you have to be an addiction survivor or a trafficking survivor or a prostitution survivor—everybody's got some brokenness. And our job is to be willing to listen, to see where we can help. How can we be God's eyes? How can we be God's hands? How can we be his feet to go?"

'We Should Do It in Coatesville'

On this Sunday morning, Mullins is on the go to share her inspiring and redemptive story and encourage the congregation of Episcopal Church of the Trinity in Coatesville as they embark on what Rev. Sherry Deets called in her sermon "a new path in our faith adventure:" creating a residential program with a social enterprise piece modeled on the highly successful Thistle Farms program.

It would mark the first sister organization of Thistle Farms, known as Thistle Hills, in the Diocese of Pennsylvania. Working under the umbrella of the Capstone Legacy Foundation, a Philadelphia-based, 501 (c) (3) nonprofit Christian Community Foundation, the Thistle Hills project has already won approval for a \$300,000 Chester County Community Development Block Grant to purchase and renovate a house located near the church in downtown Coatesville. A house suitable for the women who will live there to call home.

The project also has received a \$7,500 grant from the Stewart Huston Charitable Trust and the diocese's Anti-Human Trafficking Commission covered all expenses for Deets, Deacon Joan Wylie, and Thistle Hills Mission Committee member Jennifer Lopez, who also serves as Executive Director of the Friends Association For Care and Protection of Children, an organization working to help families move out of poverty and homelessness, to attend the national Thistle Farms conference in Nashville earlier this year.

Deets expects the \$300,000 Chester County Community Development Block Grant to aid efforts to raise needed start-up funding to get the program off the ground. And once it launches, the program will need volunteers.

Deets has long been an unabashed fan of Becca Stevens and the Thistle Farms program. "I have every one of her books, I quote her all the time, and I've admired her ministry," she says. ▶





“This community is about to spread grace, mercy and love”

REGINA MULLINS

When the Anti Human Trafficking Commission first began looking at starting a Thistle Hills sister program in the Diocese about three years ago, Deets' first reaction was: “We should do it in Coatesville.” ▶

There were discussions about starting a program in Philadelphia, but Deets says “the idea would not leave me alone. I couldn't sleep. For me, this is kind of how things happen when the Holy Spirit is telling me, ‘You're going to do something and I'm not going to let you alone until you do it.’ I've also been around long enough to realize it doesn't necessarily happen the way I think it will happen.

“So I thought, ‘OK, God, I'm going to take the steps and see what happens. Because maybe you're not telling me it will necessarily be a Thistle Farms program, but whatever happens in the process is where we're being led.’ I started talking about it in the community, and I was overwhelmed by the positive responses.”

A City on the Rise

The timing certainly seems fortuitous. In addition to the residential program, Thistle Hills also has an intriguing social enterprise component that enables the women to learn new job skills and earn a living wage to support themselves. As an added bonus, the profits generated by the business stay in the community to support the residential program.

Once again, it's modeled on Thistle Farms, which started its social enterprise with candle-making when Mullins was a resident there. It has since blossomed into a global business that includes everything from essential oils and personal care products such as lotion, body balm, and bath salts to clothing, accessories, and jewelry, among other items.

Coatesville is currently in the midst of revitalization efforts that are bearing fruit. Coatesville 2nd Century Alliance is a public-private partnership working to

build the city's capacity to improve current conditions, stabilize the socio-economic stature of the city, foster economic development, and bring resources and community partners together.

The city is also Chester County's only Opportunity Zone, a federal community development program that encourages private equity investment in low-income communities.

“It would be great here. It just seems this would be a perfect community for that, especially with all the new development that's going to be happening here and the way this community looks out for each other,” Deets says.

Examples of social enterprises from other Thistle Hills sister organizations include hand-crafted leather products, honey and granola, earrings, coffee shops, blankets, art studios, selling products of other artisans, and much more.

“We need to figure out exactly what that social enterprise piece will be,” Deets says.



Discover the Grace

'Love Is the Most Powerful Force for Change in the World'

Some places where Thistle Hills programs have started began with the social enterprise component. But Deets says she believes that starting with the residential program is important for women who are coming out of the trauma of human trafficking, addiction, and prostitution.

"What makes this program so successful is the two-year residential piece. It is the offering of a comfortable home for these women to live in, and everything is provided for them," Deets says. "Their medical needs are met, their spiritual needs are met, their mental health needs are met. They're provided food, care and shelter for two full years. But during that time, there's some intensive work, especially at the beginning, on recovery.

"I recognized that two years was a key in helping people get their lives transformed."

Mullins is living proof. "Regina is a living, breathing example of how love is the most powerful force for change in the world," Deets said as she introduced her.

Today, Mullins, who has been clean for 23 years, is married and has custody of her children. She has studied theology at a Nashville university, and spent the past two decades working at Thistle Farms "to bring this gift of another chance" to women all across the country.

Recently, she started her own nationwide consulting business with Thistle Farms sister organizations, including the Coatesville project.

"You guys have offered me the chance to come here to say the women in Coatesville, the people in Coatesville, are about to have their minds blown because of Thistle Hills," Mullins told parishioners. "It's coming. It's going to be a refuge to so many women who are feeling what I felt

all those years ago. Hopeless. Helpless. Loveless. Worthless. And this community is about to spread grace, mercy, and love and let [those women] know you have a home, not a house. You have a home to come home to."

When the Thistle Hills program opens in Coatesville, women who have traveled the same hard road as Mullins will have the opportunity to discover the grace and mercy and love that she found at Thistle Farms more than two decades ago.

"God heard me when I said I can't go back to those streets," she said. "God didn't forget me. I just believed the lie that He didn't love me." ■