

Precious Blood holds weeklong effort to promote peace

By Joyce Duriga | *Chicago Catholic*
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(Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)

In the early afternoon of Sept. 23, people could be seen on the grounds of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation in Back of the Yards walking a labyrinth and painting peace rocks.

They were taking part in the organization's Campaign for Nonviolence Week, Sept. 18-26. Other events in the week included nonviolence training for community members, a bike ride through the neighborhood, a music circle and a community cleanup.

"Each year, we create events for the week to transform our world to be free of racism, violence, war, poverty and environmental destruction. That's the mission of the Campaign for Nonviolence," said Franciscan Sister Janet Ryan, who spearheaded the weeklong celebration. Sister Janet also manages PBMR's Education Lab.

The week was inspired by California-based Pace e Bene's annual global Campaign for Nonviolence Week.

Those who walked the labyrinth were given small slips of paper with the community's needs on them. Those needs were identified by those who participate in many of PBMR's outreach ministries. The people walking the labyrinth were asked to hold the message in their heart while they walked.

"It is all to continue to bring healing in our community," Sister Janet said. "It's a community that has struggled with violence and poverty, mainly those two big things. So we want to get out there and be like, 'Hey, we're here. We're with you.' We're trying to be a beacon of hope and a beacon of light for the community and let's have some joy in the midst of the heaviness that we have."

During the bike ride, neighbors came out and waved, beeped car horns and cheered them on, Sister Janet said.

"I felt like I was a Hollywood star. That to me was the most powerful part, that folks in the community were really touched. I think that we brought some joy," she said.

The week focused on engaging members of the Back of the Yards community and to spread the message of peace and joy.

“We’re just trying to connect with the neighbors and get out and kind of reclaim the streets and the corners for peace and unity and healing,” Sister Janet said. “We love our community and there are a lot of needs, but we feel we can address that through relationships and through restorative justice.”

Alberto Alaniz directed the painting of peace rocks on Sept. 23. He has worked at PBMR for 10 years and connected with the organization after he was released from prison. Several of the organization’s programs help those recently released from incarceration.

“I started painting while I was in prison,” Alaniz said. “I taught myself and then I started teaching the inmates. I imagined myself continuing the art career and also teaching out here. Luckily, I found Father (David) Kelly and Precious Blood.”

Art plays an important role in restorative justice and promoting peace, he said.

“It’s another form of expression,” Alaniz said. “Sometimes people can’t communicate verbally. Sometimes people communicate physically. They lash out sometimes or they don’t know how to communicate. Art is a way for them to express themselves and communicate with others.”

Offering the rock painting was a way to give the community a way to relax and express their thoughts and messages with others, he said.

Olivia Hurst attended the event and said she has benefited from PBMR’s programs.

“Precious Blood is like a home away from home. It inspires me. It gives me great hope,” Hurst said. “It teaches me that I can move forward in my life because I’m a recovering addict.”

Participating in PBMR programs gives Hurst peace and relaxes her, she said.

“I feel love. I’ve been at Precious Blood for like six years and I have grown,” she said.

She is working on getting her GED and will graduate next year. Her daughter and grandchildren also attend programs at PBMR.

“Precious Blood made me take out the word that I always had for so many years that ‘I can’t,’” Hurst said. “And it taught me to know that ‘I can. You can do anything that you want, Olivia, once you make up your mind.’ And they are with me every step of the way.”

For information on Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation, visit pbmr.org. □