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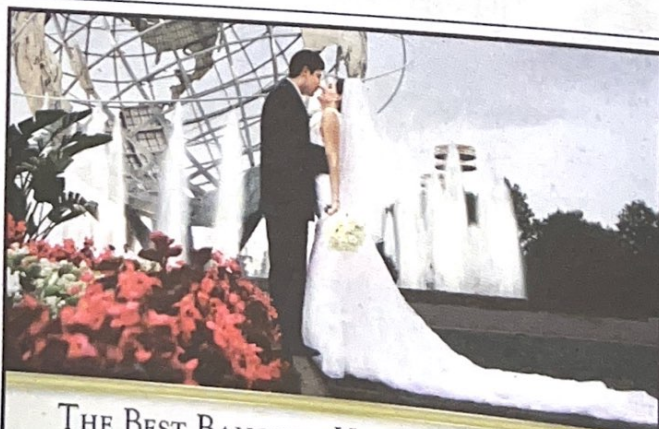
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Donna received her law degree from St John's University of Law. She is currently the President of the Catholic Lawyers Guild of Queens, President of East River Kiwanis Club, Chair of the Elder Law Section of the Queens County Bar Association and was past President of both the Queens County Women's Bar Association and the Astoria Kiwanis Club.

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Parenting Group Offered To Clergy Abuse Victims

▲ by Marie Elena Giossi

The diocesan Office of Victim Assistance is starting a new initiative to help survivors of clergy sexual abuse build stronger family relationships.

A parenting group for survivors in Brooklyn and Queens is set to begin Jan. 28. Participants will meet once weekly to share a meal and discussion, guided by trained mental health professionals. Sessions will cover the unique questions and concerns parent-survivors face in raising their children.

Jasmine Salazar, diocesan victim assistance coordinator, explained that this group is being offered in direct response to what a diocesan committee of survivors have requested.

Members of the diocesan Survivors Advisory Committee meet regularly to assess the needs of those who have been victimized by clergy or church personnel, and develop forms of pastoral outreach. Last year, the group requested a Mass of Hope and Healing, which Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio celebrated at St. James Cathedral, Downtown Brooklyn.

Following the Mass, "Bishop DiMarzio wanted to know what else we could do for the survivors," Salazar said. When she reached out to them, one of the first suggestions was a parenting group.

"The (parenting) group's purpose is to guide and help survivors with issues that come with being both a parent and a survivor," said Salazar, who has previous experience conducting parenting classes.

She is one of two licensed social workers who will facilitate the sessions using The Parenting Journey curriculum, a 12-week program designed to help participants build on their strengths and enhance good parenting behaviors.

Salazar says her goal is to help attendees "gain confidence in their parenting and help them improve their relationship with their children."

Group members will be invited to try to better understand their experiences growing up, and any trauma related to parent-figures.

Salazar explained that one of the greatest challenges for parent-survivors is "when a child is the same age as the parent was when the abuse took place."

In some cases, she noted, the parent "might become overprotective" for fear of the same thing happening to their child. Other parent-survivors push their own children away for fear that they might hurt them.

While research shows that adults who were victims of sexual abuse in childhood are at an increased risk of becoming abusers later in life, Salazar points out that risk doesn't dictate reality. By conducting this group, she hopes to help parent-survivors address their fears.

Letters about this initiative have been sent to diocesan parishes and are appearing in parish bulletins. Salazar has also reached out to victims' assistance coordinators in dioceses across the country since "survivors often relocate," she noted.

Registration for the group is still open, and every potential participant is screened to ensure the confidentiality of the group. Interested parties may call 718-623-5236 for more information.

Another initiative planned for later this year is the formation of support groups for the survivors as well as their parents and spouses.

"There are different victims," Salazar noted, and her office seeks to help survivors and their families find reconciliation and healing.

Health Care Seminar for Clergy

Clergy, faith leaders, and those serving in professional ministries are invited to join featured speakers Kirk A. Bingaman, Ph.D., of Fordham University and Father Michael Perry, pastor of Our Lady of Refuge parish, Flatbush, for a conference on "Tackling the Growing Health Crisis among Faith Leaders: Body, Mind, and Spirit" on Jan. 27, 9:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m., at Harbor Hill Senior Housing, 5613 2nd Ave., Brooklyn.

The program will present important spiritual care and behavioral health information. Breakfast and beverages will be provided.