

HOMELESS IN PARADISE
Week of June 7-13, 2019

PENINSULA PULCHRITUDE - Part 23



IF MAGDALENE PULLED OFF A MIRACLE, WOULD YOU DARE TO DO SO, TOO?
By Wanda Sue Parrott

mary magdalene
jesus christ's loved prostitute
begat thistle farms

USING the alias “Magdalene” back in 1997, a young Nashville street minister took a giant leap of faith by putting Biblical “Good News” to the test by inviting five street women to share a 750-square foot house someone had donated to her.

If former prostitutes, alcoholics, addicts and sexually abused women—and Magdalene herself—survived without authority figures present, could the doubtful Christian message “With Love All Things are Possible” be resurrected amidst hunger, hopelessness and homelessness?

In other words, could Magdalene, whose real name was Reverend Becca Stevens, pull off a hoped-for miracle?

Here's what I learned about Magdalene House at the April meeting of Friends of Homeless Women, outreach arm of the Fund for Homeless Women.

Inspired By Role Model, Mary Magdalene

Kelsey Davis, a soccer player and coach, and her wife, Heather Davis, a director of Hospice, recently relocated to the peninsula from Nashville. They appeared barefoot as a symbol of women and girls still "walking the streets" who need to come home.

Magdalene House, which legally became Thistle Farms Inc. in 2015, is a community of women calling themselves Magdalene Sisters.

They're healing from prostitution, trafficking, drug addiction and homelessness.

Magdalenes wear tee shirts that proclaim Love Heals and their symbol is the thistle, a beautiful purple wild flower with thorns and a soft silky white interior, which, like female victims, can grow through the cracks, retain beauty, and survive spiritually unscathed.

A few Magdalenes are white, but most are brown and black.

Thistle Farms began as a cottage industry in 2001 in the original Magdalene House kitchen in Nashville, Tenn. Women began making scented candles which they sold; the industry now includes products made by female participants from employers around who offer work to 1,400 survivors of poverty violence, addiction and trafficking, thus helping women gain economic independence and a healing community.

Although secular in nature, they call themselves "Magdalene Sisters" with the same hushed reverence one expects from sisters in service in the Sistine Chapel.

Thistle Farms includes a two-year residential program, social enterprises that employ survivors, and an education and outreach plan for the public, based on the belief that love is the strongest force for change in the world.

Kelsey and Heather, calling themselves "The Women of the Woods," introduced Thistle Farms' 22-year history as the evolution of a worldwide female workforce whose social media "Thistle Stop" has 400 retail outlets and 18 global partners that sell goods made by women and girls who might otherwise be on the streets between ages 7 and 11 and active in sex work by 12 through 14.

How Magdalene House Began

In a short video promo, Becca Stevens' told how she wandered into a coffee shop in Nashville one day in 1997, sat in a window seat, and a woman came up and said, "Hi, baby. Welcome . . . I see you here all the time. . ."

Donna sat down, told Becca her story of recovery, and said, "I'm a poet."

The next day when Becca went for coffee, Donna said, "Can I bring you a bowl of soup?"

Becca said, 'Yes, I'd love a bowl of soup.'"

Donna's remark that she really needed a place to share her poetry inspired Becca to open Magdalene House to five residents and hold Magdalene Circle discussion groups. The first circle, Donna's poetry reading, drew 11 people. Today, Thistle Farms' weekly Wednesday Magdalene Circles continue to change lives of women and girls around the world.

Mary Magdalene symbolically begat the project by inspiring Becca with an idea that birthed a miracle in motion.

Heather explained, "Magdalene was the inspiration, not because she was a prostitute but because she was the first woman to proclaim the Good News to the world: Love heals!"

Radical Hospitality

Twenty-two years after opening the 750-square foot Magdalene House, Becca's statement continues to be proven true: It does not take a hundred people to start a movement. All it takes is one bowl of soup and a great idea.

That was then. This is now.

Thistle Farms Global Market utilizes shared trade practices to increase the profit margin for women at 29 partner organizations in 20 countries.

"Thistle Stop" has 480 retail outlets, 18 global Shared Trade partners and by 2016 its custom line of "Love Heals" beauty products was in all Whole Foods stores. That same year, Becca—aka Magdalene--was named CNN Hero.

Women of Thistle Farms make natural products that are good for the earth and for the body. Products are sold at 400 stores across the country and at www.ThistleFarms.org.

Heather Davis described Becca Stevens as "working with women on the streets back in 1997, some of whom had been there for 30 or more years" when she realized "it was going to take a community to build them back up."

Heather laughed. "Becca's a force of nature! . . . she believed in radical hospitality! So she invited five women to live in the house-- for free!"

So, do you believe in miracles? How about trying out radical hospitality to help house our homeless women in Monterey? A coalition of talented craftswomen who could sell their goods would also help.

Any radical organizers available to kick off such a plan?

To learn more about How Love Heals at Thistle Farms, e-mail: contactbecca@contactbecca.org .

Inside Olympia Shelter

The overnight shelter for 35-50 homeless women and children in Seaside that's just received HEAP funding, will be explored at the next meeting of Friends of Homeless Women, Wednesday, June 26, 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m., St. Mary's By the Sea Episcopal Church, Pacific Grove.

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Photo by Harold E. Grice

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