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A practical compassion

The Nurturing Network heals hearts, saves lives

On Mothers Day 1985, a new organization was born of one woman's commitment to support other young women faced with the heartache of an unplanned or crisis pregnancy. The charity, The Nurturing Network, provides individualized, practical assistance to any woman seeking a positive alternative to abortion. Over the last 26 years, The Nurturing Network (TNN) has grown from a handful of its founder's friends to include 50,000 volunteers in all 50 states and in 30 countries worldwide. Mary Cunningham Agee, TNN founder and St. Helena parishioner, has personally counseled thousands of women through this lonely and often frightening experience.



Back in 1985, Mary was just recovering from the premature loss of a dearly loved, and much-longed-for, child. That experience led her to realize how much young women like herself must struggle when they become pregnant – but, unlike her case, with little support or resources, perhaps seeing abortion as the only option. That same year, Mary and her husband Bill, sold their vacation home to provide start-up money for TNN. “Yes, this is a personal story,” Mary shares, “but this is also about a movement. There are many of us who are perplexed as to what is going on. What should we be doing today? How can we make a difference in these young women’s lives?”

A native of Falmouth, Me., and graduate of Harvard Business School, Mary (Cunningham) Agee gained national prominence in the '70s and '80s as one of the first women to serve in top management for two Fortune 100 companies. In 1981 and 1982, she was voted one of the “25 Most Influential Women in America” by World Almanac. Since that time, Mary has shifted her networking focus – from a fast-paced business career to an

equally rapid expansion of the services offered by TNN.

We caught up with Mary at her Napa Valley home to speak with her about this work.

North Coast Catholic: What led you to formulate the idea behind The Nurturing Network?

Mary: My first child, whom we named Angela Grace, died in a late miscarriage during the sixth month of pregnancy. In the aftermath, I felt such profound anguish – I was 30 and wasn't sure if I could have more children.

At the same time, I have looked at moments of profound suffering as an invitation for grace, an invitation from a loving God to know something you might not know. We don't choose to be in pain. The only explanation I can find is that there's a gift embedded in the suffering. Our job is to find that gift. The deeper the pain, the harder we have to look.

After months of prayer and contemplation, I began to realize how blessed I was to have loved and longed for this child – and how much greater the anguish would be were the pregnancy unwanted and unplanned. I found myself hearing about women who had also lost a child – not due to miscarriage, but because there was no one there for them to make it possible to choose to give birth to that child. I felt no guilt at the death of my daughter, just

sadness and loss. Imagine the pain of a woman who feels she has no other option than to let that child go, for lack of any real alternative or support. It was through this experience that The Nurturing Network (TNN) was born.

Using research and interviewing skills gained through years of corporate practice, I called 10 abortion clinics in the Massachusetts area and asked if I could speak with 10-15 women who had an abortion. I wanted to understand their motivation, their needs and how they felt about their decision. When I asked women if they were experiencing a great sense of liberation or freedom, they invariably responded that this was not a choice that made them joyous or proud – they simply felt they had no other option. Then I asked, “What would have made you feel you did have a ... choice?” It was these women who wrote the business plan for TNN: “I would have had a place to stay and better job opportunities,” or “I'd have finished my education.”

North Coast Catholic: How did you see The Nurturing Network answering these needs?

Mary: We needed to network — we needed to bring all those skills and connections developed and honed in the business world to young women so they could see new possibilities and choices for their lives.

There is a chasm between people with great values and ideas and those with great practical skills who know how to get the job done. TNN represents the combination of the two: practical idealism. Networking is as practical as it gets.

Nurturing is at the core of what we're trying to do. That is why TNN has been so effective. If we all just cared and wanted to make a difference, but didn't know how to connect, we would never have gotten the 50,000 people worldwide making this work.

North Coast Catholic: How distinct are these two elements of the practical and the ideal?

Mary: I think this is an important message to Catholics, that we have a responsibility to bridge that gap. How many people do you know who graduate from college and have skills, but lack the values and ideals to transform society? We have all these wonderful people at Mass who have values and ideals, but also real world experience, knowledge and connections. We want to give them an opportunity to put these gifts to work, so that others are able to see new possibilities, and follow in their path.

North Coast Catholic: Could you give us an example of a typical TNN client?

Mary: Our client is typically aged 18–25, educated, middle-class, and usually Caucasian. More often than not, she is in college or just out of college, and she's working.

She has a spiritual dimension to her life, and some formation in her youth that guided her to pick up the phone and call TNN. When she calls, she wants to talk, but doesn't want to be told what to do. She knows an abortion will cost about \$400. She also knows the impact a pregnancy will have on her schooling, her career and her financial future. She wants really practical alternatives that would allow her to make this choice. No theories, no preaching, just real life options.

North Coast Catholic: What are your clients looking for?

Mary: After many years of experience, we have broken down what they are looking for into five core elements. These are essential to her making the choice between giving birth or ending the pregnancy.

1 Nurturing Home: Many of our clients need a safe, supportive place to live. We have more than 850 individual "nurturing homes" in different regions of the country where a client lives with a family, free of charge. Two types of homes work the best: families whose kids have grown and moved on are fabulous; and, families with little kids who would love to have someone to provide an extra pair of hands are also a good choice.

Sometimes a client needs to relocate because of an abusive relationship, if her parents or campus don't want there, or her peer group is applying extreme pressure to get an abortion. Local crisis pregnancy centers do a great job with advice where there is no need to relocate. But if parents, boyfriend or peer group pose no real problem or threat, then TNN will collaborate with the local crisis pregnancy center and will ensure local housing appropriate to her needs.

2 Employer Network: We don't believe in warehousing a woman for the duration of her pregnancy. We want to make sure she has something to show for the nine

months, that her resume is intact. We have 750 fabulous employers, some of whom are located in all 50 states, and are ready to hire our clients on short notice. I earn their respect by maintaining professionalism: I won't try to move someone where she doesn't belong — such as placing an unqualified applicant into investment banking. But, yes, I have investment banking opportunities for those who are pursuing that in their lives.

3 Education Network: We have an educational network of 1,000 colleges and universities where we can transfer someone within three weeks. If they want to keep the reason for their transfer confidential,

the client comes up with their own reasons, but I've got colleges and universities where I can call the dean of students or president and arrange an immediate transfer, no questions asked.

4 Network of Doctors: Fourth, we need doctors who will be supportive of our clients' choice and who will deliver the baby. We find her a good doctor where she's located. If the client can't afford it, we'll pay for it.

5 Network of Counselors: Finally, she needs an appropriate counselor — someone who she can talk with, based on her needs. Even if the client says she has never had a problem, and doesn't need professional therapy, anyone can benefit from an inspirational counselor. Counselors can get very specific very quickly — lights go on, options generate and positive decisions are made.

Emotional happiness is the important element during this time. She wants to know she is bettering herself as she is doing something noble. She needs to improve herself during this process. Working towards something, plus doing something very good.

North Coast Catholic: What do you ask of the clients when they leave the network?

Mary: We now have more than 20,000 clients who have been served. The only thing we ask is they pay it forward. They bring closure to their experience by offering to support others, when given the chance.





Sarah

"I had no clue where to turn for help until my mother learned about TNN from a youth counselor. When I called, I felt numb with fear ... but in speaking with Mary, I immediately felt a sense of relief ... Within days, Mary put together real solutions for me. She worked out a creative academic plan with my college dean, found me a wonderful female doctor in Boston and introduced me to the most kind and encouraging nurturing home. For the first time I knew I would be OK." - Sarah

TNN introduced Sarah to the president emeritus at BC and to a caring priest on campus, who provided counseling and a plan for Sarah to attend night classes where she could continue her education without compromising her confidentiality. In this supportive environment, Sarah finished the semester with As ... Baby Michael's adoptive parents were present for the birth, which the family describes as "the greatest joy we have ever known."



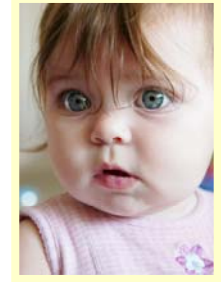
Clare

Feeling alone and judged, Clare, a 31-year-old single mother of three with plans for entering medical school, called TNN for help. A victim of date rape, Clare found herself abused and abandoned by the father of her baby, and pressured by friends and professionals to abort her child and "move on." Clare needed emotional support and tangible resources to follow her heart and her dream.

With financial assistance from TNN, Clare rented a Ryder truck a few weeks before her due date and moved herself and her family across the country to Arizona, where her new medical school was located – and where she could protect herself and her family from her abusive ex-boyfriend. There, she sought the assistance of other graduate students, who offered encouragement and helped with the relocation. She was able to obtain additional funding to continue her medical education.

After considering adoption, Clare decided her other children would be blessed in having a new addition to their family. She also realized that her newly chosen career would provide financial security in the long run. TNN professional staff and counselors helped increase Clare's self-confidence, and served as a sounding board from which she could make decisions for herself and her family.

. . . The result: Clare will graduate with a medical degree in 2011 as a confident mother who is hopeful about her future and able to provide for Suzanna and her sisters.



www.nurturingnetwork.org

Special thanks to Deirdre Frontczak and the Diocese of Santa Rosa for permission to reprint this article.

Does It Matter to You?

"I was pregnant - and you made a placard to carry at the next rally.

Thank you.

I was imprisoned by prejudiced and indifference - and you crept off quietly to pray for my release.

Thank you.

I was hungry - and you formed a debate team to argue the merits of 'pro-life' vs. 'pro-choice'.

I still can't nourish my baby or me.

I was naked and couldn't afford maternity clothes - and you questioned the morality of my circumstances.

What good did that do?

I was sick, confined to bed - and you left for a chapel where you could thank God for your own health.

But I needed you.

I was homeless, my parents were ashamed - and you preached to me of the shelter of God's love.

Was there really no room at the inn?

I was out of work, my boss said I made customers uncomfortable - and you cursed the callousness of my employer.

Why couldn't I have worked for you?

I was lonely, the baby's father wanted nothing to do with me - and you left me alone so you could pray for me.

Why didn't you stay?

You seemed so much holier than me . . . so close to God; but I am still frightened and very much pregnant.

Does it matter to you?"

-- Mary Cunningham Agee