



Eleanor Smith says she feels bolder and more hopeful as a result of the Sycamore Tree Project®.

Last year was particularly difficult for Eleanor Smith. First she was injured in a brutal assault that knocked her teeth out and left her temporarily deaf. Later her checkbook was stolen and her car was vandalised. Hoping to put the painful past behind her, she left her job as the owner of a bar and moved to a safer neighbourhood in England.

The violent and senseless nature of the crimes affected her greatly however, and her suffering continued after her physical wounds healed. In an effort to facilitate her own emotional healing and that of others, she began volunteering with a victims support group and was later invited to attend a Sycamore Tree Project® by another member.

Prison Fellowship International's Sycamore Tree Project® brings crime victims into prisons to speak with offenders. It was named after the story in Luke's Gospel about

Fear Gives Way to Hope


Zacchaeus, a corrupt tax collector who climbs a sycamore tree in an effort to see Jesus over the crowds. After Jesus stops and speaks to him, Zacchaeus demonstrates a change of heart and announces plans to give to the poor and pay back what he had taken. The Sycamore Tree Project® allows offenders to come face-to-face with the devastating effects crimes like theirs can have on the victims, and it shows them how to seek reparation.

With much apprehension and fear, Eleanor agreed to attend the five-week seminar. "I didn't know what to expect," she explains. "Seeing the prison and waiting for the prisoners to arrive was very daunting." She planned to tell them her story, wanting them to be pained by her words, but doubting they'd have much effect. "I thought they would be monsters," she reveals, "but when I met them, they seemed like normal people. Many were just victims of their circumstances."

Eleanor found strength to speak to the group of prisoners, many of whom had committed similar crimes. She related the horror of her experiences as a crime-victim and emphasised that the consequences went beyond the pain inflicted on her. "My mother witnessed the assault," she told them, "and it had a devastating impact on her health." In fact, the crimes she experienced had a negative impact on many of her relationships, which she is now working to restore.

During the last session of the programme, Eleanor was astonished to discover that the prisoners had not only heard her comments, but had been deeply affected by them. One prisoner spoke of his profound regret for what he had done. Another read a poem he had written for her. "It was as if they looked into my soul and understood my pain," she recalls.

She entered the programme with deep feelings of resentment, but left with a growing sense of hope. "They gave me back my faith in the human race," she says, "and I feel that I have made a difference. I saw a glimmer of hope amongst those prisoners, and that made it worth it."

Eleanor now plans to attend a carol service at the prison, something she says she would never have considered prior to participating in the Sycamore Tree Project®. She has also accepted an invitation to attend another Sycamore Tree session in January. This time, she says, she will be filled with hope instead of fear. 

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