

Gianna Centre empowers new moms with dignity, skills and grace

When Jennifer Lung walked through the doors of Gianna Centre a year ago, her life was in turmoil.

She was abused, pregnant and had nowhere else to turn. But the Edmonton pregnancy support centre offered her more than diapers and baby clothes. The support she received reconnected her with faith. The Gianna Centre is named after St. Gianna Molla, the patron saint of mothers and unborn children.

“I was at a bit of an impasse with God before,” said Lung as she held tight to her nine-month-old son, George. “My relationship turned abusive shortly after my pregnancy, and I felt like I was very much by myself – just alone and afraid.



An icon of St. Gianna Molla, the patron saint of mothers and unborn children, is displayed in the new Gianna Centre. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

“This organization has helped me through a lot of battles, and it has really renewed my faith and re-connected me with God. I’ve always felt we must prescribe to a higher power, but Gianna Centre has been instrumental in growing that and leaning me towards the Catholic and Christian faith.”

Now Gianna Centre, a ministry of Catholic Social Services, is enhancing its outreach to women in crisis. The centre held an open house at their new location in the Strathearn neighbourhood on Jan. 30. The building, previously

used as an office and rectory for the Assumption parish and a storage space by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, is being leased by CSS from the Edmonton Archdiocese.

The facility features private rooms, a medical office with an ultrasound, a playroom filled with toys, a storage room packed with donated clothes and strollers, and a prayer room. The location also offers better access on public transit, and a more home-like environment than the former site further south. With a new LRT line being built nearby, project manager Vera Fischer believes they will be reaching more women than ever before.

“There are many practical advantages to this location,” she said. “With the Assumption Parish next door, we’ve also received help from their parishioners, the Knights of Columbus and Catholic Women’s League as well.”



The new Gianna Centre location has better access and a more home-like environment. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Over the last five years, Gianna Centre has helped more than 400 pregnant women. Staff and volunteers offer long-term help, accompanying women through their pregnancies and beyond. Services range from prenatal care, massage therapy, and classes on faith, parenting, budgeting, and even cooking.

“Some women are here only for a month, and others stay with us even into their second child,” said Fischer. “Our primary goal is to ensure these women know their dignity. A lot of women are broken and coming from a difficult home life. The most common challenges are not just financial, it’s a need for a place

where they feel supported.

“The one thing we always hear is, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to do this alone.’ ”



Vera Fischer

Gianna Centre has two paid staff and roughly 20 volunteers who can see the difference in the women who come through the doors.

“Seeing women who were considering abortion change their minds – that always tops the list for us,” said Fischer. “Often when they come to us, they look gloomy and hopeless. It’s an amazing feeling when you see their appearance change when they have their child – they’re glowing. They can’t imagine life without this child.”

To celebrate the opening, Archbishop Richard Smith blessed each room.

“This is an extraordinary testimony to the commitment the Church offers to the cause of life,” said Smith. “From the moment I walked through the door here, you can feel there is an energy, excitement and joy. What I want to simply add to that is that God is rejoicing too.”

Faith has a central role in the mission of Gianna Centre. Since last year, its Discover Your Dignity program has helped Jennifer Lung and more than 20 other women grow in prayer and their relationship with God.



Ena Theroux

"We felt there was a spiritual aspect here that was missing," said Ena Theroux, who volunteers with Discover Your Dignity.

"So we developed this program where we talk about their relationship with God and how to pray. We talk about Mary, the angels and saints. And it's about self-esteem – we assure them that God loves them and that their children are loved."

Theroux hopes the program instills a sense of belonging, no matter the difficult circumstances facing the women who come.

"Some ladies come here post-abortion, and they find it really helpful to hear what other girls have gone through, and know they're not alone in their distress and their sorrows," she said. "A lot of them may feel guilty about being unmarried and pregnant. We try and reassure them that it doesn't matter what mistakes you've made -- God treasures you. God is waiting for you in prayer."

As she drops off her son with volunteers in the playroom, Lung is hoping for a long future with Gianna Centre not only as a client, but also as a volunteer.

"It's been instrumental. They've been like family in helping me. So I want to be a part of that at this new centre," she said. "Pay it forward, or rather, pay it back."

CORRECTION: This story was re-edited to include that the new Gianna Centre was also a former office and rectory for the Assumption Parish.