

Pro-life activist has first Christmas out of jail in seven years

For the better part of a decade, pro-life activist Mary Wagner has spent the holidays behind bars.

Her last seven Christmases have consisted of small gift bags from prison chaplains and a “nice dinner” of processed turkey, stuffing, vegetables, and a butter tart. Inmates only get butter tarts twice a year.

“Every time I have been in custody over Christmas, I had a sense of joy in that the first Christmas was so poor,” she said. “Jesus was born in unpleasant circumstances,” and she was experiencing “similar poverty and wretchedness.”

Yet, it was always also with a sense of “heaviness,” being unable to celebrate with family “the way you know you should be celebrating the birth of Christ.”

Wagner, 44, is from Delta and has become an internationally-known pro-life activist. According to Ontario judge Neil Kozloff, she is also an unrepentant serial offender. Her crime? Walking inside abortion clinics, giving roses to the women waiting inside, and offering prayer and information about other options.

Those actions violate Ontario’s “bubble zone” laws, which demand abortion protesters keep a certain distance away from clinics. Kozloff, who sentenced her to seven-and-a-half months in prison in an Ontario court last July, said then that Wagner had broken that law 14 times in 18 years.

“People have often asked me if I could not simply stay outside the area I am forbidden to enter, and in that way, avoid arrest,” Wagner has said. “But this question forgets something: the children scheduled to be killed will have no one to stand up for them.”

Wagner didn’t let jail time stop her from again picking up roses and stepping back into those invisible bubble zones. She’d get arrested, go to court, serve her time (usually a few months), and get back at it again. She has spent a total of nearly five years behind bars.

“Being back in custody is not usually an easy thing, but there is something beautiful about being close to those who are broken,” Wagner said.

Currently enjoying freedom after a seven-and-a-half month sentence, Wagner has been visiting family, reconnecting with supporters, and giving talks to high school students in the Lower Mainland.

When she is invited by teachers to speak in their classrooms, she shares her

reasons for opposing abortion (despite possibly facing jail time), and her experiences while in custody. She has made a few shocking discoveries while behind bars.

“About 85 per cent of the women I speak with (in prison) tell me they have had an abortion.” They have other things in common, too: the majority were teenagers at the time, were coerced by a boyfriend or family member, felt they had no other option, and deeply regretted it.

“I met a few women who came out in a very hostile manner, very vocally opposing (me), but that was the exception,” Wagner said.

One woman she met in custody had become pregnant at age 15 and was forced into aborting the child by her mother. The results were devastating: the girl broke ties with her family, fell into substance abuse, and was still dealing with the effects when Wagner met her behind bars at age 29.

“Abortion is really a mother taking her child’s life, and deep down she knows it’s wrong. No one is punishing her, so there is this self-punishment that goes on” that can last for decades, said Wagner. She talks to them about faith, love, and mercy, in an effort to console them.

It was important to Wagner to share that message with teens at Vancouver College, Notre Dame, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Patrick’s, Archbishop Carney, and St. John Brebeuf.

“Hopefully they could avoid that situation where they were being pressured. They would have the strength to receive that life,” said Wagner.

With the holidays coming up, Wagner doesn’t have plans to visit abortion clinics anytime soon. She is looking forward to celebrating Christmas with her family, attending Mass in her hometown, and taking a month-long retreat in a monastery to pray and think about what to do next.

“Every year, I try to give it back to God and see if he wants me to continue on.”