



Young women full of GRACE *interview with Sheila Mack*

Sheila Mack is the director of Godly Young Women Reaching After Grace and Elegance (GRACE) ministries at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago. The ministry began in 1994 and now has an average yearly attendance of 40 to 50 teenage girls who meet one Saturday a month for nine months during the academic year. GRACE has about 45 volunteers, all women and most from the business or corporate world. The group's guiding mission is based on Titus 2:3-5.

MICHAEL KELLY: Share with us how the idea for GRACE ministries began.

SHEILA MACK: Fourteen years ago I was getting frustrated with how teenage girls and women were portrayed in what was considered the 'hip-hop culture.' I began to observe the music/rap artists and how they dressed and talked and how some of our teen girls within and outside of the church wanted to emulate them. I went to a sorority sister (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.) of mine at our church and said to her, 'I think it's time for us to start a program for teenage girls.'

There were so many women in the church who had college degrees and were in the corporate sector and could actually direct these young girls into selecting a good career and provide them with godly direction for their lives.

Q: What was the response of your church when you presented the proposal?

A: We went to Bishop Arthur M. Brazier and presented him a proposal, and he was really in sync with us. He shared his desire to expand the church activities for our teenage girls. So along with six other women from my sorority, who also attended our church, we founded the GRACE ministry.



Photos provided by Sheila Mack. Young women in the program participate in a culminating event at the end of the year (above and right).

Q: What are the goals of GRACE, and how was the ministry received?

A: We started off with eight teen girls and focused on increasing their self-esteem and self-image and establishing high moral and ethical standards for them to follow. We wanted also to emphasize the importance of femininity and what it meant to be a woman of God. We are still focusing on these things. The girls in our group were ages 11 to 18 when we started in 1994. We've now focused our attention on teen girls between the ages of 13 to 17 (high school seniors,) and we have a culminating ceremony at the end of each GRACE program year. We highlight the talents and gifts of our girls and spotlight our graduating seniors.

Today, we have about 45 volunteers and 40 to 50 girls in the GRACE program each year. On average, two-thirds of the girls make it through the entire year to participate in the culminating event. We are ministering, teaching and mentoring to these girls for nine months, one Saturday a month.

Q: What are the expectations of the young women involved in GRACE?

A: At the beginning of the GRACE Program Year, I tell our girls, 'My challenge to each of you is to stick this out, no matter how tough it gets, no matter how tough the standards are. God has a plan for you and this program will transform you. The world doesn't owe you anything. The world isn't going to give you what we're giving you. This will be a safe environment for you to be yourself, but you will be taught to be your best. Outside these walls it is a cold world. You are blessed that our God has sent so many incredible women to pour



Poise, presentation and appropriate dress are some of the characteristics and expectations of the GRACE program.

into their lives.' I tell them that the GRACE leaders are nothing but God's vessels, made in the image of God, and so are they.

Q: How do you recruit for the program?

A: Every year we recruit and we use a lot of creativity to invite teen girls into our ministry. We have teen girls in the program who recruit their friends, we pass out brochures, we attend other youth ministry events in the church. However, a lot of our recruitment comes from our pastor, who every year makes

an announcement from the pulpit as we're getting started. He makes it very clear to our church's mothers and fathers that they are to place their teenage daughters in GRACE if they want their daughters to become women of God and learn how to respect themselves and be visible in the church as young women of God. Because of our pastor's support, we've never had a problem recruiting.

Q: What does the programming look like for the participants?

A: We provide a wide range of activities and services that gives them what they are looking for in a youth group. The girls are very open with us. As the volunteers, we design, develop and deliver workshops on a variety of topics such as abstinence, salvation, personal hygiene, your relationship with God, etc. We conduct small group sessions that are led by adult female GRACE volunteers (who are addressed as 'Sister.' I am 'Sister Sheila' to our girls). These volunteers are able to create a safe space through the use of scripture and various learning activities (i.e. role plays, skits, reflective exercises, etc.) to reinforce that

these girls are fearfully and wonderfully made as stated in the Bible in Psalms 139:14.

Q: What have been some of the challenges in your ministry?

A: Some of the challenges in our ministry include trying to instill in some of the girls the need for them to adopt a style of Christian attire. When GRACE meets, we all dress in skirts and dresses, and that just isn't the way our society is anymore. We address this challenge by holding an orientation for students and parents where we talk about expectations and rules, including the attire.

Parents are given an agreement to sign so that they understand what we will be doing throughout the year. We have the calendar for the year, with meetings every month. At the GRACE Ministry, we are very structured, and I bring my experience from corporate America to the ministry and make sure that we are all clear about our mission, vision and direction from God.

Another thing that we see is that some girls struggle to be leaders initially, as they may not have any prior leadership experiences in their lives (at school or at home). Our biggest challenge is that we have difficulty monitoring what happens outside of GRACE. Even though their parents sign our agreement, when our girls go to school, we have no control over how they dress or behave. We ask parents to help us instill the values of femininity and GRACE, but if parents aren't willing to handle this responsibility, we can only control what happens at our GRACE meetings and events. We emphasize respect, for ourselves and for each other.

Q: Can you recall a specific occasion in GRACE that challenged you personally or expanded your own faith?

A: I recently had a young woman in GRACE who was absolutely a leader but was modeling negative behavior by talking back to our volunteers and leaders and being disruptive during the workshop sessions. I was ready to kick this girl out

of GRACE based on my observations and the feedback from the volunteers. I set up a meeting with this girl and her mother, and while driving to meet with them the Holy Spirit said to me, 'You can't do this to this child.' And the whole time I'm driving, I'm having a battle with God. I didn't know what I was going to do. I knew what I wanted to do and what the other GRACE volunteers wanted me to do, but God had another plan and spoke something different into me. I met with this girl and her mother and found myself

saying, 'This has to stop. You are a great leader and I believe that God wants you to use your leadership skills in a positive manner.' I also told the teen girl how I truly loved and cared about her, and that I believed she could change.

Let me tell you what this young woman has done: She has never misbehaved since, and she has earned her nursing license and she's working and happy. In addition, this girl is respecting the GRACE volunteers and

leaders. Everyone in the GRACE Ministry is astonished at how God has truly transformed this girl.

My motto is that we don't give up on our teen girls because God did not give up on us. Because of how this girl has changed her approach and disposition, I bought her a gift to show her how proud I am of her, and every time I see her now I smile and tell her that again. In addition, I regularly go up to her and tell her how beautiful she is and how I knew she could do it. At our culminating event this year, her mother blessed the GRACE Ministry with a financial contribution, and here I was, feeling ready to give up on that child, but God had a plan!

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Q: How do you sustain your energy and enthusiasm for this ministry?

A: I never knew what people meant when they said 'find your passion.' I realized recently that I was called by God to this ministry. Yes, I was supposed to get my college degrees and to work in corporate America, travel the world with my work, but ultimately my calling related to having an impact on the lives of teen girls. My heart is in this. For God has said that it is the responsibility of the older women to oversee the lives of teen age girls, and we follow Titus 2: 3-5 closely when God calls for us to train our younger women.

I have to watch myself so I don't get too emotional sometimes ... I sometimes see more in my girls than they see in themselves. I see me in them, how when I was a teenager God transformed my life. I tell my volunteers, see yourself in that child and you will not forget how important it is to work humbly and lovingly with them.

Q: How do you recruit volunteers? You have almost 50 a year, you said.

A: We tend to have women who are professionals who gravitate to the GRACE ministry. We have women who are medical doctors, managers in corporate America, women who own businesses. We organize our ministry to give services to these teen girls and to make sure that all of us are able to give the most attention possible to them – it's all about giving to them.

We work with these girls from a variety of angles – Christian living, societal issues and peer pressure, providing mentoring – and always in the spirit of love and having fun with them. As a result of God's favor, our pastor's support, committed volunteers, and lastly our organizational structure, I think we're running pretty well, and I know that God is pleased with the impact GRACE is making in the lives of teen age girls. For it is God who is transforming the teen girls; we are only the change agents and vessels God is using for his perfect work.

Q: Scripturally, what are your guiding influences for the ministry?

A: We teach our girls to be fearful of the Lord. We know that we are all striving to be the Proverbs 31 woman. We should not be so wrapped up in external things, but to instead see that our beauty is from the inside and that we need to exhibit the fruits of the spirit. That's the No. 1 focus of the GRACE Ministry – love, patience, kindness, gentleness. We show the girls these gifts and we ask them to show and share these gifts to the world, to think of themselves as beautiful in God's eyes. Our society is saying that without a certain body size or hairstyle, they aren't beautiful. We tell them, 'You are beautiful and loved' because you have been created in the image of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ What kind of legacy do you want to leave that will impact the lives of teenagers?

⇒ What can you do in your church community to bridge the gap between society's negative view and God's positive view of teenagers?

A longtime member of Apostolic Church of God in Chicago, Sheila Mack is the co-founder and director of GRACE Ministry.

She has been in youth ministry working with teenage girls since 1994 and is the founding president and CEO of ESTHER Ministries Inc. She has an MEd in adult and corporate instructional management and a BA in communication arts from Loyola University in Chicago.



FIND OUT MORE ...

GRACE Ministries

P.O. Box 715

Tinley Park, IL. 60477

Telephone: 708-429-7044

E-mail: mack.sheila@yahoo.com

Web: www.estherministriesincworld.com

www.apostolicchurchofgod.net