

Taking Jesus to the Fringes: On the Orange Blossom Trail

✖ She says she is 26, but she looks younger. Tattoos cover her arms, a ladybug among them. A sales tag hangs from her purse. Sunglasses-big, cheap and gaudy-are perched on her head. She is small, feminine, attractive. Immediately she bursts into tears.

The details of her appearance do little to convey who she is. But the moment she hears that God loves her, tears well up in her eyes and run down her cheeks. She wipes them from her face, her dark eyes darting around to see whether she is being watched.

(Photo: Sandra Roman walked the Trail for seven years but now as a Christians helps with Open Door.)

“I believe He’s with me,” she says, not giving her name. “I’ve been in situations with guns going off in houses, and He’s taken me out of situations. He’s blessed me.”

Tearfully she tells what happened just the day before. A man pulled up and asked whether she wanted a date. She asked whether he was a cop, because undercover officers in Florida cannot lawfully misrepresent themselves when asked directly for their identities. The man reached for a Bible and placed it beneath her hands.

“He said, ‘Jesus loves you,’ and he gave me \$20,” she relates, sobbing.

Peg de Alminana embraces the young woman, telling her she looks like her daughter, and prays for her. “You are God’s daughter,” she told her. “He loves you, and I love you,” as she gives the woman a white rose.

It is how de Alminana spends most Saturday evenings with volunteers for her ministry, Open Door Healing and Renewal Center for Women. The ministry is for prostitutes like this one-the battered, broken people of a thriving sex and drug trade along Orange Blossom Trail, which snakes through

Orlando, Florida, minutes from the city's prized theme parks.

Here, the rape rate is six times the national rate, and the murder rate is nearly seven times higher. When you consider how many rapes go unreported here you begin to understand just how rife the crime really is.

Bustling big box stores such as Barnes & Noble, Best Buy and Publix supermarkets co-mingle with immigrant-owned eateries, crack motels and strip clubs. Prostitutes walk the Trail day and night.

This is where de Alminana has located her ministry, and on Saturday evenings she and her volunteers cruise the Trail. When they spot a prostitute they stop, give her a white rose, pray for her and invite her to Sunday services.

"For a woman who's been used and abused, giving a white rose to them is just so unexpected," de Alminana says. "If you really hear [a woman] speak about her heart, she really wants to be free, but there are all those issues, all those challenges, all those addictions, all those bondages."

De Alminana established the ministry in February after working five years as senior chaplain at the Orange County Jail. Her mission now is to reach women on the other side of the revolving door. So many experience Christianity inside jail. Then their pimps bail them out, and they are back on the Trail.

Operating on a small budget of donations de Alminana offers crisis counseling and mentoring from a center right on the Trail. She offers Sunday services, Bible studies and prayers. Some of her volunteers are former prostitutes, and together they help women access basic needs such as food, housing and health care.

Perhaps most important they tell them they love them. It is a frequent refrain. De Alminana and her volunteers say it constantly to one another and the women they meet on the Trail.

They say it to a woman named Kat immediately as she opens the

door to her motel room, where she has lived for seven years. Kat is not feeling well, and as she accepts her white rose she pulls aside her shirt to reveal a swollen, silver dollar-size sore on her shoulder, covered by a bandage.

It's a spider bite, Kat says, but de Alminana warns it could be MRSA, an infection that can be fatal. De Alminana talks to Kat about whether she could take her to get it checked. Then she and her volunteers pray for Kat.

Kat knows de Alminana well. Her motel abuts the Open Door center. For 10 years Kat has walked the Trail. She is here every day, earning money to pay rent, buy food, smoke crack. She says she is 49, but the creases in her face make her look older.

She lives in a motel where the pool is filled with dirt and weeds. Her room is cramped and musty smelling but meticulously kept-her knick-knacks arranged just so. Among them is a statue of the Virgin Mary. Her posture is slumped, her manner matter-of-fact.

"I'm a prostitute, and I do drugs. I'm not going to lie," Kat says. "I pray every day and every night that He's going to bring me up out of this bondage. And I just sit and wait for Him to do it. I have faith in Him. I think it will happen. I don't know how."