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NEIGHBORS

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Sola Gratia Ecumenical Choir:
Transformation Through Song



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PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY SOLA GRATIA ECUMENICAL CHOIR

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n June 2 at 4:00 pm, Sola Gratia, an ecumenical women's choir, will present the concert "We Are Held—A Journey of Transformation Through Song" in the sanctuary of Strawbridge United Methodist Church as a fundraiser for the Oaks of Righteousness. The concert will feature songs that speak to God's ability to transform lives.

The Oaks of Righteousness is a nonprofit organization in Humble devoted to helping women coming out of incarceration. Without a healthy alternative, ex-offenders return to the people, places, and habits that led to their imprisonment. Prison experts recognize transitional living as an essential element in helping to break the cycle of recidivism. The Oaks program has a recidivism rate of 8 percent, compared to the national recidivism rate of 66 percent. The Oaks provides a secure, faith-based transitional environment for up to fourteen women over a nine-to twelve-month period.

During this time the residents participate in a program that incorporates life skills and job readiness, as well as counseling on sustaining sobriety, guidance in money management, and fostering spiritual growth. These activities allow the residents

to acquire the necessary skills to reintegrate into society and become the women that God wants them to be.

When current residents were asked about the most valuable aspect of living at the Oaks, several mentioned the unconditional love they receive and the family atmosphere. Comparing life in prison with life at the Oaks, Carrie remarked, "You're not really sure why they love you at first. It's kind of scary. I was thinking, you don't know me and if you did you wouldn't love me. Day by day, I started thinking maybe I am worth loving. The love just gets stronger and stronger, and you find yourself saying, 'I love you too.'" Beth stated, "This is the most positive support I've ever felt." "My family is here," Bailey said, "My family through Christ." Rebecca observed, "It feels more like a family than a program."

Since many of the staff and volunteers are graduates of the Oaks program themselves, the residents have role models to encourage them to achieve their goals. Charlotte was incarcerated with the current Oaks director and saw her before and after completing the program. Her reaction was, "I want that. I want that light. I want to learn to live differently." Rebecca pointed out, "The authority God has put over me are people that came from the same walk that I did. They can relate to the sin I was living in, the hard times. They lived the same lifestyle as we did."

Faith is part of every aspect of the Oaks, and several named this as a crucial part of changing their life path. "The most meaningful part of the Oaks is growing my relationship with God and learning how to do that," Sasha observed. Charlotte stated that before coming to the Oaks "I didn't know how to live a godly life, I didn't have that support." "I knew God but didn't want a relationship with Him," Carrie noted, "But sitting in prison, I knew that the only way I was going to do something different was through

God." Beth especially values "the opportunity to be close to God, and to have these months to soak everything in. God is showing me that I've come this far; I just have to trust His plan."

The monthly operating cost of the Oaks is about \$15,000. The program is currently supported financially by contributions from community members, local churches, and civic organizations such as the Rotary Club of Lake Houston, The Story Church, Woodlands Methodist Church, United City Church, and Kingwood Methodist Church, as well as grants from Insperity, the Stoller Foundation, and Hope Legacy Foundation. However, fundraisers such as this year's concert provide essential resources to keep the program going.

Directed by Meredith Koerner, Sola Gratia, which means "by grace alone," began as a quartet and has grown to its current size of about forty members. The group has performed twice at the White House as well as at the Texas Capitol rotunda and the 2013 Texas Annual Conference of the Methodist Church. Originally a worship choir for Kingwood United Methodist Church, Sola Gratia is now a nonprofit organization that focuses on a united outreach to all women. The group's mission is not only to create a choir of excellence for women, but to support diverse ministries and community groups through the universal language of music.

Accompaniment for the concert will be provided by Sergey Kuznetsov, an award-winning international concert pianist and a faculty member in the music department at Lone Star College Montgomery. The Strawbridge Strings orchestra will also participate in the program.

The ticket price is \$20 per person. Tickets will be available at the door, or online through www.oaksoftexas.org. An offering for Oaks of Righteousness will be held at the concert. Following the concert, guests are invited to a dessert reception in the church commons, provided by board members of the Oaks. Strawbridge United Methodist Church is located at 5629 Kingwood Drive, Kingwood. For more information please go to the Oaks of Righteousness website: <https://www.oaksoftexas.org/event-details-registration/sola-gratia-concert-to-benefit-the-oaks-1>.

