

Passaic's purple powerhouse: a voice for battered women

By VIRGINIA ROHAN
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Sandra Ramos years ago chose a title for her autobiography, a book she's been far too busy to finish writing: "Clean Socks for the Revolution."

Though certainly catchy, it doesn't begin to telegraph the complexity of this North Jersey woman, who founded the nation's first official shelter for battered women and has worked ceaselessly for nearly 40 years to protect abused women and their children.

No single label could encompass all the dramatic, kooky, inspirational, colorful, funny strands in her crazy-quilt story. Ramos — whose many achievements, setbacks and controversies are documented — is a bundle of surprises: a pacifist who lives in a Quonset hut that was once on a military base; a revered but frenetic boss whose nickname is "St. Maniac"; a lesbian who prefers "sacred companion" to "partner" and fan-

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cially really threw filmmaker Jacquelyn Aluotto. But the Edge who doesn't believe in abortion; water woman persisted, and, for and a firebrand who can be Ramos' work for an upcoming documentary, "Not in My Back Yard."

"No one works like she does for these kids and women," says Aluotto. "She really is the real deal. She helps people 24 hours a day seven days a week."

As Sandra Blumberg, she originally aspired to be a flight attendant. Or maybe a dietician. Born in Brooklyn, the "always rebelling" only child of Jewish parents, she moved with her family to New Milford. At 11, (but looking far older, she says), she ran away from home.

"I took the money I had. I went to the Port Authority. I said, 'how far can this get me?' They said, 'Baltimore,'" recalls Ramos. She and a friend got waitressing jobs and slept at a run-down, ach-infested motel, oblivious to having generated a 23-state fugitive warrant.

When the two returned to New York a couple of weeks later, Ramos was sent to a farm-like "school for emotionally disturbed children with a tendency toward delinquency" in Westchester. She was there almost four years, graduating from nearby Pleasantville High School. (She has since earned a master's degree in applied urban anthropology.)

Ramos was 18, back living with her parents (in Demarest) and waitressing at a Hackensack restaurant, when she met 34-year-old Cuban-émigré Magin Ramos, who printed the daily menu. They were married 10 years and had three children. "It took a long time to decide to get divorced, 'cause he was a very nice man. And he wasn't abusive," she says. "I just didn't like being married."

After her divorce, she wanted to share her Hackensack home with other single moms. "The ones that came to my house were all battered women," says Ramos, whose first arrival, a nurse, came in the middle of one night in 1970.

Word got out, and other women came to Ramos' door. She always took them in.

Frances Treanor — then assistant manager for the Hackensack office of the Social Security Administration — was on the panel that decided to fund an official Bergen County shelter. She distinctly remembers meeting Ramos on Oct. 28, 1977.

"In comes Sandy with her long flowing hair and the colorful hippie garb. I was in my little conservative Chanel suit," says Treanor, who was nonetheless



BETH BALBIERZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Sandra Ramos stands with the goddess statue on the roof of her office in a former church.

impressed with Ramos' compassionate approach and got the group to go along with funding Ramos' Shelter Our Sisters Treanor, who continues to help and work-training programs, Ramos served as its founding chairwoman.

In 1986, the shelter board fired Ramos — refusing to state their grounds, though Ramos had repeatedly clashed with the board over her sometimes unconventional techniques, her opposition to mandatory counseling for battered women, and the screening out of women with alcohol and drug problems. After losing a court appeal, Ramos, who'd been renting a no-frills cabin at Ringwood's Weis Ecology Center every summer, wondered "why am I living in Bergen County when I love it up here?"

'Everything I want'

Ramos, who teaches courses on domestic violence at Ramapo College and William Paterson University, takes no salary for her work directing the shelter. She lives simply. "You know what? I have everything I want," she says.

She long ago came out as a lesbian, and for 30 years Ramos has been with girlfriend Ann Benedetto, an interfaith minister at the Lakeland Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Wayne — and coincidentally, the niece of Tony Bennett. Now a grandmother of two, she is close to her daughters Maria (a California attorney) and Sandy (a music therapist in New York) and son Robert (an importer who lives in Port Lee).

When her kids were small, she'd pay them a nickel for each pair of freshly laundered socks they could match up. Hence, the first part of the title "Clean Socks for the Revolution." It's a book Ramos definitely plans to write. Someday.

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