

Ramos helps women help themselves

by Judy Lutolf

AREA - What do you call a woman who is a credentialed sociologist/anthropologist who works as a waitress and is the foundress of a system of "safe houses" and a shelter for battered and abused women?

Besides remarkable, the women who have benefited from this network of support named Save Our Sisters, call this woman their friend, Sandra Ramos.

Twenty years ago, long before it became known to the general public, Ramos became aware that women in the "white" suburbs were being abused and battered. The very idea was, in Ramos' words, "very unpopular and really in the closet."

Ramos founded an organization in 1970 which operated out of her home incorporated under the name Shelter Our Sisters. Under Ramos' direction, the organization grew, having a budget of 1/4 million dollars a year and a Community Review Board.

Laughing about it now, Ramos said the Board wanted Shelter Our Sisters to handle "cupcakes", or women she described as having no history with drugs or alcohol. Although many of the clients helped through the years are white, middle class, non-alcoholic, non-addicted women, there are many who do not fall into any of those categories. When Ramos wanted to continue to keep her organization as she founded it, a people centered, helping and supportive network of understanding individuals, she was fired by the Board.

Ramos, who took her case to court was told by the judge that "the Board had the right to be wrong."

Back at the helm of Save Our Sisters with the gratitude of the many women and families she has helped through the years, Ramos continues to operate out of her home in Ringwood. Ramos credits many private individuals and "politicians" who have supported her work with battered women. Each year, a parishioner of St. Mary's Parish in Pompton Lakes makes a very generous donation which permits the shelter to remain open and helps defray operating costs. Other private donors provide other tangible items such as food or money.

A waitress by choice, Ramos says she was "forced to go to school." She now has a masters degree in sociology and anthropology "because I love people." Recently, Ramos was on the faculty at William Paterson College. Ramos admits to having a simpatico relationship with waitresses admiring their "street smarts." Ideally, Ramos would like to take all the social workers she has known through the years and make them waitresses so they get a dose of real life and not the problems which come between the covers of a book.

At this time, Save Our Sisters operates about "3 or 4 safe houses" depending on the economy of the times. A "safe house" is any house owned by a concerned citizen where an abused or battered women may stay for awhile. More often than not, this includes the children. Save Our Sisters also operates a shelter in Bloomingdale.

To help defray costs, Save Our Sisters operates Another Women's Treasures Thrift Shop on Ringwood Avenue in Haskell. The thrift shop is self sufficient and pays its own way. Ramos would like the shop to compete with the Saturday garage sales.

Working as manager of the thrift shop is one of Sandra Ramos' biggest supporters, Belle Wilson. Wilson is a recovering addict and alcoholic who has experienced three years of homelessness living in welfare shelters in White Plains, N.Y.

At one time, Belle was the director of a private school in Vermont having attended Marymount on the Hudson in Tarrytown "with Susan Lucci". Belle Wilson described herself as a "black, middle class female from a very Victorian background." Wilson's story is much like that of many women who find themselves overwhelmed and addicted. She took a bus from N.Y. and was taken by the police in Bergen County to Sandra Ramos. Proudly, Wilson said that she has been clean and sober for a year and a half. When she had a "slip", Sandra "did not throw her out," but encouraged her to start anew.

Both Wilson and Ramos said that the thrift shop acts much like a drop-in center for women who need counseling. It's visibility in Haskell makes it an ideal place for Friday afternoon sessions with Matt Teirney, a therapist who practices in Wayne. Tierney's wife, also a therapist, treats the children of the women who come to the thrift shop for help.

One of the more tangible "things" provided by Save Our Sisters is housing. Tina Herring of Remax has waived her commissions in an effort to help find housing for the clients of Save Our Sisters.

With the coming of the holiday season, Save Our Sisters could use many things which according to Belle Wilson, "make children smile." The program acknowledges the Christmas tree donations made each year from St. Francis Church as well as the many store owners who make donations to the shelter on a regular basis.

Making women independent and able to say "no" in order to make a decent lives for themselves and for their children has been Sandra Ramos' goal. The fact that she has not had any "repeaters" is testimony to her success.

Ramos asks that this holiday season, Save Our Sisters be part of our giving list.

Sandra Ramos can be reached at 728-5888. Another Woman's Treasure, 1066A Ringwood Avenue, Haskell, is open Monday through Saturday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Anyone wishing to send donations for the holidays can send a check to Save Our Sisters, c/o Mable Wilson, 54 Tintle Avenue, West Milford, N.J. 07480. If the check is sent "to make children smile" during the holidays, please mark it "for Family Fund". The tax number for Save Our Sisters is 22-2858735.