

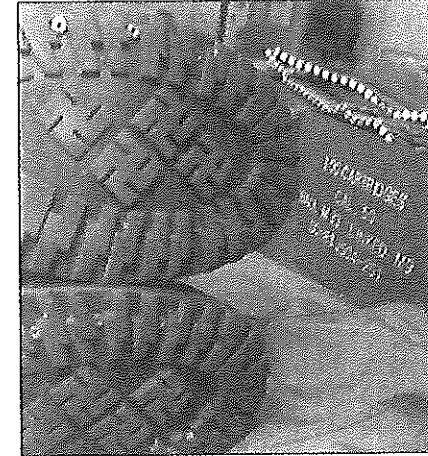
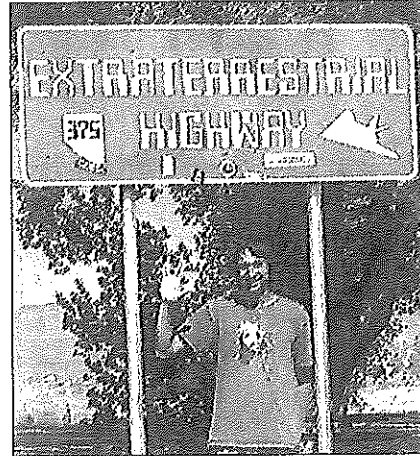
The Record SECTION L

Local

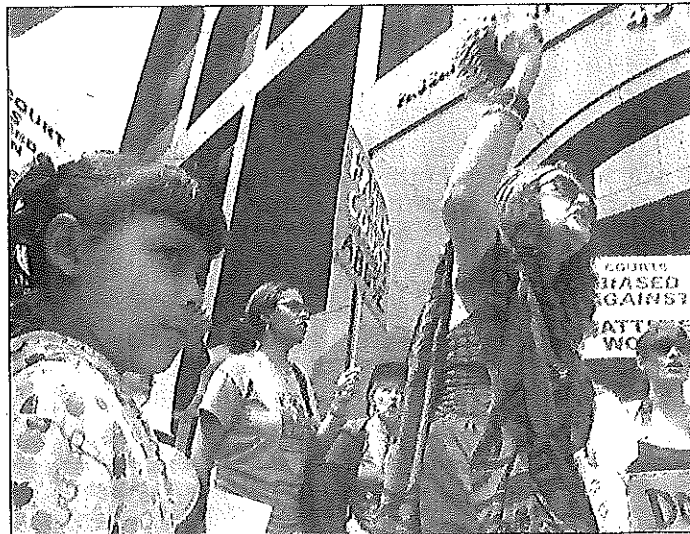
Sat. 05.09.09

EDUCATION 2 • OBITUARIES 4, 5

In seven months of running, former MSU student has crossed the U.S. **3**



Clifton apartment held some disturbing items, cops say, including guns and a skull. **5**



ELIZABETH LARA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Activist Sandra Ramos leads a rally at the Passaic County Courthouse on behalf of battered women.

Women rally for rights

By ELAINE D'AURIZIO
STAFF WRITER

PATERSON — The struggles of abused women to match their husbands' legal resources in court were the focus of a noon rally Friday by activist Sandra Ramos and some 35 survivors and supporters in front of the Passaic County Courthouse.

Ramos, who runs several battered women's shelters in Passaic County, said legal counseling is in short supply for women who flee with nothing but their children,

Domestic abuse victims plead case for legal help

and that the state judicial system should have greater sensitivity to their plight and take action.

For one, she called for the establishment of a civilian review board "where cases can be reviewed when children are wrongfully taken away."

"We want every victim to have

an advocate sitting beside them in court instead of in the back of the courtroom ... they're petrified," she said. "We want judges to get training on the specific dynamics of domestic violence so they know why women act the way they do. And we want legal representation in court. There is no place for

them to go now for legal help."

As she spoke, women — some with children in strollers — cheered, beat drums, and waved posters that included "Children Should Be Seen, Heard, Believed, and Protected" and "Family Court Fails Women." They included contingents from New York, and several related their personal situations, alleging they had been subject to domestic abuse and then to a legal system that discounted their claims and was weighed against their efforts to keep their children.

See **BATTERED** Page L-6



At a rally at the Passaic County Courthouse on Friday, women making their assertion that courts are letting them down.

Battered: Women demand justice

From Page L-1

One woman from New York City said she was there with other battered women "because this is happening everywhere and we need to be united."

Ramos, of Ringwood, founded Shelter Our Sisters in Teaneck and is also founder and executive director of Strengthen Our Sisters, another shelter she started in West Milford.

Her contention about a shortage of counsel for battered women was borne out by other advocates and figures in the legal field.

"We have to turn away a number of women who come to us for help because we don't have the resources to represent everyone who contacts us," said John Fitzgerald, executive director of Northeast New Jersey Legal Services, which serves Passaic, Bergen and Hudson counties. He said that last year, the agency handled 535 custody cases in all three counties and that "We're turning away four out of five low-income people who come to us because we don't have the staff."

Custody cases, officials agree, are complicated, often require professional testimony from psychologists and are long and costly.

"Women are at a real disadvantage if they come to court without an attorney," Fitzgerald said. "And women are more likely to go unrepresented in court because generally the man has the job and the resources to hire an attorney."

Elaine Meyerson, executive director of Shelter Our Sisters in Teaneck, said her shelter has a few attorneys who offer pro bono —



Kelly Depaola, a mother of four from Paramus, speaking out in support of abused women during Friday's rally.

Fast facts

Where abused women can seek legal help:

- Northeast New Jersey Legal Services, serving Bergen, Passaic and Hudson counties: Paterson: 973-523-2900 Hackensack: 201-487-2166 Jersey City: 201-792-6363
- Shelter Our Sisters: 201-944-9600
- Strengthen Our Sisters: 973-728-0007
- Alternatives to Domestic Violence: 201-336-7575

free, volunteer — work, "but not on an ongoing basis ... maybe a case or two a year. Some will offer clients services at a very low fee."

But, she said, even the appeal process is costly. "Women face a

challenge because, on average, men make more money than women, tend to have more assets in their name, and many are able to smartly hide some of their assets and income off the books — it

doesn't show up."

Alternatives to Domestic Violence (ADV) in Hackensack has hired an attorney panel to represent clients concerning restraining orders but, when it comes to lengthy custody cases, it is extremely difficult to find a lawyer, Meyerson said.

Kelly Berton Rocco, a family law attorney in Hackensack, handles many cases for ADV and said that "once you're talking about domestic violence and custody, these women and children are being victimized all over again."

"A lot of the time, due to lack of funds, they can't defend against a custody fight by the batterer," she added. "He is still living in the marital home, and she may be living in a shelter or with her family. But she shouldn't lose custody on those grounds."

Ramos also used the rally to criticize family court judges, who she claimed are insensitive to the claims and fears of abused women and their families. She cited such cautionary examples as the Teaneck case of Avi Kostner, a father who abused his son on weekend visits as his former wife unsuccessfully waged a seven-year legal battle for supervised visitation. Kostner killed his son Ryan, 10, and daughter, Geri Beth, 12, in 1994 on a weekend visit three days before they were to move to Florida with their mother.

Ramos said she invited state legislators and Gov. Corzine to attend the march, but they did not show.

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