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Celebrities rally around financially strapped women's shelter

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NORTH JERSEY — Their worlds seem as different as night and day — domestic violence victims and those famed in the entertainment, fashion and beauty industry. But their worlds are coming together 8 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 28 when celebrities take up the cause of saving a Passaic County women's shelter at a Halloween benefit at Eric Alt Salon in Wood-Ridge.

Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS), with shelters in West Milford and Wanaque, lost roughly \$450,000 this year when the state Department of Children and Families (DCF) decided SOS could not meet its qualifications for an emergency shelter. SOS founder Sandra Ramos and DCF still differ on whether the shelter would have been able to care for victims at a moment's notice, but the fact remains that the state did not continue its \$450,000 contract, which left the shelter with a major shortfall. Although Ramos said

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she is determined that the shelter she opened in 1970 will not close, surviving this past year without the funding has meant a lot of fund-raisers and sacrifices for the staff.

"The shelter is struggling. It breaks my heart," said Jacquelyn Aluotto, creator of Pick It Up! Pictures, who is donating the proceeds from her documentary "Not In My Backyard," with footage from SOS shelters, to the cause.

At first, Aluotto said she had a tough time trying to interest the public in the plight of domestic violence shelters, even with shelters closing their doors around the nation due to the economy.

She noted that there's a stigma attached to shelters that arises from misconceptions about domestic violence victims, but drawing celebrities and fashion/beauty experts into the cause is helping to conquer that stigma and mold the public into willing supporters of the cause.

"We want to take that stigma away. We really want to make it trendy to give back," said

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Aluotto, who also calls attention to domestic violence on realbeautyrealwomen.com with the help of beauty and fashion experts like hairstylist George Ortiz of TV's "Project Runway."

Building upon that idea of turning the shelter into a trendy cause, the Halloween benefit on Oct. 28 will transform the Eric Alt Salon at 219 Valley Boulevard in Wood-Ridge into an '80s-style disco complete with celebrities, go-go boys, and red carpet. Among the attendees will be Wayne native Danielle Staub, formerly of "Real Housewives of New Jersey" who has partnered with singer/song writer Lori Michaels on "CRY," a music video about domestic violence (with footage from SOS) and will give 5 percent of the proceeds to the shelter. Also expected to party for the cause is champion figure skater Johnny Weir, an Eric Alt Salon client.

The suggested donation is \$25 for those attending the event and tickets can be purchased at the salon in Wood-Ridge (219 Valley Boulevard) or Saddle River (67 East Allendale Road). Tickets will also be available at the door.

National funding struggle for shelters

The pinch of today's economy is being felt by women's shelters across the nation, said Brian Namey, spokesman for the National

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Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV).

"We're in dire straits," he said, confirming that some shelters have closed their doors.

The NNEDV report — Domestic Violence Counts 2009. A 24-hour census of domestic violence shelters and services — found that in one day alone, local programs provided lifesaving services to more than 65,000 adults and children but left more than 9,000 requests for services unmet largely because of a lack of funding.

As a possible solution, both the House and Senate have introduced a measure to reauthorize the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act to dedicate federal funds to domestic violence shelters and other local programs.

Other more hard-hitting issues have taken center stage, however, in this election season, said Namey, who characterized the bill as not moving past introduction.

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