



MIRACLES HAIR DESIGN is the latest achievement of Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS), a northern New Jersey non-profit organization that benefits homeless and battered women and children. Pictured are (seated) Sandy Ramos, SOS founder and executive director; as well as (standing, L-R) Xenia Herrera, who oversees the shops day-to-day operations; Karen Weeks of Karen's Place in Boonton; and staff member Pauletta Gibbs.

Miracles Hair Design Opens in Wanaque, Marking Latest Achievement for SOS

WANAQUE - When Miracles Hair Design opened its doors at 563 Ringwood Avenue in September, the event marked the latest achievement of Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS), the northern New Jersey non-profit organization that benefits homeless and battered women and children. The full-service hair and nail salon will offer professional cut, styling, color, permanent wave and nail services.

SOS purchased the two-story building that houses Miracles last summer for its four upstairs apartments that will serve as transitional housing for single women and their children. Downstairs, the building included a dry cleaning shop, which is still operational, and a vacant storefront which formerly housed a beauty salon.

On the day of the closing, Sandra Ramos, SOS founder and executive director, was scheduled to pick up a donation check from Karen's Place, a full-service Hair Salon and Retail Center in Boonton, New Jersey. Soon after meeting owner Karen Miller Weeks, the two women began brainstorming.

Ramos knew that several women in the shelter were cosmetologists. Others might be interested in learning the trade. Still others could take advantage of services to update their look before entering the workforce. And, of course, a salon could generate much-needed funds for the shelter's programs.

Making Miracles

Miller Weeks agreed to design, build, help staff and oversee operations for the salon, and to donate

enough used equipment to get the operation started. Harry Comp of the Parisienne Beauty Academy in Hackensack, New Jersey was enlisted to help the women with out-of-state training get through the licensing process in New Jersey. Comp also agreed to provide guidance for other shelter residents interested in careers as cosmetologists, with assistance from state funding.

Once Miracles is fully functional, Xenia Herrera will take over the shop's day-to-day operations. Comp and Miller Weeks will offer on-the-job training for the new licensees at Miracles, with the possible opportunity of permanent employment. Shelter residents wishing to take advantage of the salon's services to improve their appearance will be able to pay by volunteering their time at the salon. Profits from off-the-street business will be rolled back into the shelter.

"Two months after the idea first surfaced, Miracles opened," Ramos said. "This has been an amazing cooperative effort by everyone involved, from Karen and Harry to our contractors, many of whom donated extra services and products. The salon's name is highly appropriate." Additional financial and volunteer support is needed and welcomed. For information, call Miracles at 973-835-1991.

According to Miller Weeks, who will continue to consult, handle bookkeeping and generally oversee operations for Miracles, her commitment to SOS stems from the organization's goal to break the cycle

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of domestic violence. "The truly wonderful thing about Strengthen Our Sisters is that the shelter's focus is not just to get women out of abusive situations," Miller Weeks said. "SOS also provides the tools for them to become independent, self-sufficient people. They need never to go back to their old lifestyle, and they can teach their children to live differently as well.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Sandra Ramos founded Strengthen Our Sisters as the first battered women's shelter in North America, in her own home nearly 30 years ago. She housed 23 women and children, and demand grew quickly. It was an idea whose time had come. Today, SOS operates a 73-bed shelter and also provides transitional apartment housing. Its numerous programs offer advocacy, outreach, and education.

"Unfortunately, battering touches nearly every family in our society," Ramos noted. "Today, people recognize the crisis, but even women who receive

care are often re-victimized because shelters do not have enough funding to help them to help themselves. Our goal is to offer an alternative."

One of the first programs SOS founded to help women achieve independence involved providing them with donated cars. "This enables women to drive their children to school or child care, and then get to work on time," Ramos explained. "However, while the cars are donated, they still require maintenance and insurance which cost money. So we started businesses to help subsidize the costs."

These companies - including Dollar Treasures at 1071 Ringwood Avenue and Books & Herbs at 541 Ringwood Avenue in Wanaque; OMNI Day School at 1221 Union Valley Road in West Milford; as well as Treasures Thrift Store, the SOS Depot Print Shop and Green Mother's Garden at 196 Lincoln Avenue in West Milford - have grown to do much more. Like Miracles, they provide valuable job and skill development opportunities that help SOS's clients get back on their feet.