

'Second coming' keeps shelter director going

By Elaine D'Aurizio
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It was a typical, dizzying week for Sandra Ramos, one that would send six other people running for the hills.

She was trying to raise bail for a battered woman who insisted she never pulled a gun on her husband. There was a march to arrange in memory of a woman who was murdered by a former lover. In between, Ramos was on the phone — begging for money, old clothes, welfare funds. And, of course, there were new arrivals at her shelter for abused women.

Five years ago, an acrimonious legal battle ended with Ramos' ouster from Shelter Our Sisters, the Teaneck-based shelter for battered women she had founded in 1977. Now the tenacious, 50-year-old advocate is in business again, this time in northern Passaic County.

A friend calls it "the second coming of Sandy Ramos," which makes Ramos smile. But she insists her resurrection as a shelter director was not by design. "I didn't plan it, it just kind of happened," she said.

With a \$350,000 state grant and personal contributions, Ramos' new shelter — "Strengthen Our Sisters," in West Milford — is made up of an 11-room farmhouse, a carriage house, and 10 motel units. It's a relaxed setting — more sprawling and much greener than Teaneck.

But for Ramos, the mood inside is a throwback to earlier days — casual, caring, democratic. Women and children — at times more than 40 strong — breeze in and out, leaving on errands, cooking din-

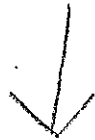


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Sandra Ramos with Lena Algarin, left, and Anthony Bell, both 2 years old, at Ramos' "Strengthen Our Sisters" shelter for battered women and their children.

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ner, bandaging a child's bruised knee.

"There's no bureaucracy, it's like one gigantic family," said Mary Brooks-DeGroat, a shelter worker who herself once stayed at the Teaneck shelter. "All the women have a say in the running of the place. Everybody does everything here. There's a lot of caring and a strong sense of community."

Wearing secondhand clothes, Ramos remains the unconditional earth mother, the grass-roots feminist eager to help. "If there's a woman that says, 'Please help me,' then I know I have to open a shelter or have her in my house," said Ramos.

Ramos took battered women — hundreds of them — into her

Hackensack house from 1970 to 1977. She staged sit-ins, pleaded, and pestered officials until in 1977 the Bergen County Board of Freeholders granted funds to build the Teaneck shelter — the first on the East Coast.

By 1986, Ramos had two half-way houses and was lobbying for more funds. But trouble was brewing with her board of trustees. Ramos' freewheeling style, her resistance to new rules, and differences over which policies were best to help women determine their futures — all turned trustees against her.

The way Ramos saw it, her shelter had become, "bureaucratized."

"It became rigid and cold and wasn't meeting the everyday needs of the women," Ramos said. "I was worried about the isolation the women felt, the lack of individuality and flexibility."

During that dark time, a shelter administrator called Ramos "stubborn, over-protective, uncompromising."

Elaine K. Meyerson, the executive director of SOS, would not comment on Ramos' days in Teaneck. Of the West Milford shelter, Meyerson said: "Sandy is filling a need."

"There are no services for battered women in northern Passaic County and Sandy has identified that need," Meyerson said.

After she left Teaneck, Ramos taught at Baruch College of the City University of New York and worked as a waitress in a jazz club. Ramos, who holds a master's degree in applied urban anthropology, says she knew she wanted to work with women's issues but that a shelter "was something I had done." However, her name had become synonymous with battered

women, her compassion nearly legendary.

"People never stopped calling me. There wasn't a day I didn't get a call about battered women," she recalled. "They said, 'We know who you are and what you stand for. And there was no place for them to go.'"

Ramos, the mother of three grown children, again took battered women into her home, now in Ringwood. She rented an apartment in Wanaque for two families with funds raised by benefits and from a thrift shop. But the need was great, so Ramos rented the farmhouse in December.

"She was operating on a shoestring and providing a tremendous, needed service; I was very impressed," said Vincent Pavese, president of United Way of Passaic Valley, which donated \$10,000 for the shelter. "Sandy is always

on the phone asking for more, but she's tremendous! She's the type of person that, if there's not a friend, she'll take the woman in or find a friend for her."

The new shelter offers workshops on child abuse, battering, incest survival, parenting, and job training. The staff members — many of whom have college degrees — are mentors and include a trained therapist who comes once a week.

"We also need good male role models, people to teach women carpentry, plumbing, electrical work," Ramos said.

The charter for the new shelter prohibits Ramos from being fired without just cause. "If I did something wrong, something hurtful, I shouldn't be there," she said. "But I won't compromise on what I know to be true, on what I know is needed."