

"Some People Are Just Born Caring"

GAIL KESSLER

In a purple-trimmed brick house on a tree-lined street in Hackensack, New Jersey lives a 37-year-old woman who wants to change the world. For eight years Sandy Ramos has turned her house into a refuge for battered wives who have taken their children and run for their lives. In most cases, these women have no money, no jobs or job skills, and no place to go. In all cases, they are hurt, frightened, and close to despair. Their lives have fallen to pieces around them. Sandy helps them pick up the pieces and put them back together in a new, healthier, happier way. At the same time, she has been trying to make the public aware of their plight.

Sandy's shelter, called Shelter Our Sisters (SOS), was the first such refuge in the United States. For seven years, Sandy worked alone or with volunteers, raising money through T-shirt sales and other small projects and borrowing. She also contributed her own earnings as a waitress in a New York jazz club.

SOS is only part of Sandy's life: she's a divorced mother of three, so she's had to find time not only to run the shelter and work several nights a week at the club, but also to raise her children. What's more, she's put herself through college and begun writing a book. "She has unbelievable energy," says a woman she helped who now works with Sandy. "She gets home from work at five a.m. and she's up again by seven."

Last June, after years of applying for grants, arguing, persuading, pressuring, and begging for help, SOS received \$57,000 in state funds under Title XX of the Federal Social Security

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Act, and another \$18,000 in a matching grant from New Jersey's Bergen County. For the first time, Sandy and her staff—nine counselors, a counsel coordinator, child-care advocate, lawyer, office manager, typist, and bookkeeper—are getting paid. There is a board of directors, and SOS has been able to expand and organize. In late 1978 they moved from Sandy's home to a rented house in Teaneck, New Jersey. They hope to buy the house next door and establish permanent headquarters for SOS as soon as additional funding comes through. "We've helped over 1,000 women," Sandy says. "But it's a drop in the bucket. This is one of the biggest problems in America."

Despite her buzz-saw schedule, Sandy Ramos makes all who come in contact with her feel at ease; she asks questions with interest and respect, and without a trace of condescension. This is one of the reasons why so many of her "alumnae" have in turn offered to help other battered women—with or without a salary.

There's Connie, for instance, a woman in her middle twenties. Connie's husband could not accept her inability to bear more children—the result of a hysterectomy. He began drinking heavily and beat her severely, once to unconsciousness. Connie had no money of her own, no friends who could take her in. But when her husband struck their five-year-old daughter, she knew she had to get out. A friend had read a newspaper story about SOS and called its hotline number. "The next morning," Connie recalls, "Sandy came to get me and my daughter." Connie became part of the "family" of

women and children at Sandy's home, and while trying to repair her own life, she began answering phones and going out on rescues. Now she works for SOS as a full-time counselor, and takes battered wives and their children into her own rented house. She's enrolled in a college premedical program, and is full of hope for the future.

Before SOS rented the Teaneck house, most of the counseling took place in Sandy's tiny six rooms. On the bulletin board in the kitchen are letters from former clients: "You gave me the courage to go on." "If it weren't for you I wouldn't be alive today." When I visited in mid-1978, the total impression was one of cheerful chaos. Connie was talking to a new arrival at the kitchen table, while Sandy's son and a neighbor child added their comments. Another counselor was conferring with Sandy; both women were simultaneously answering two of the three phones. Sandy interrupted her double conversation to remind Connie, who was smoking, "You know we don't have smoking in the kitchen."

Though Sandy defies rules, she obviously has rules of her own. In fact, she has a taste for contradictions. She's a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn who married a Cuban and was a practicing Catholic for seven years. She's a radical feminist but doesn't approve of abortion or bottle-feeding. With her long black hair, beads, and jeans, she looks like a dedicated hippie, but she lives a perfectly straight life: doesn't smoke, drink, or touch drugs. She's tough and abrasive to those who are unsympathetic to battered-women's problems; yet to the women who come to her for help, she's gentle and loving.

Growing up as the only child in a middle-class home in Brooklyn, Sandy was radicalized at the age of five when her mother told her it

was wrong for black children to drink from the same fountain as white children. "But what if they're thirsty?" Sandy asked.

"I became more and more unhappy with the life around me," Sandy recalls. "I kept asking *why*. Why were blacks only maids and garbage men? Why were the men always boss and the women always hassled and nervous?"

Her adolescence was frustrated and unhappy. She ran away from home at 14, and spent three years in a school for emotionally disturbed children. Searching for meaning in what seemed a very unjust world, she became a Catholic. At 17, she wandered around Europe alone for two months; at 18, still looking for a purpose for her life and an outlet for her immense energy, she got married and within seven years had three children.

Sandy and her husband were divorced in 1970. She advertised in the newspaper for a woman to share her house. The first woman to answer the ad was covered with bruises: she had been beaten by her husband. She moved in. Then, at the Unitarian Church where Sandy was teaching Sunday school, she met another battered woman and offered her a place to stay too. Unexpectedly, she had found her purpose, her cause. Word quickly spread that Sandy Ramos of Hackensack was willing to share her home with abused wives and their children. Social service agencies referred women to her, TV programs invited her to appear, newspapers ran articles about the shelter—all bringing in more clients. At one point, there were 25 people staying in the house.

Along with the Teaneck house, SOS now has several shelters in private homes throughout Bergen County, most of them the homes of former battered women. Calls for help come in around the clock. "The first thing we do is get medical attention for her," Sandy

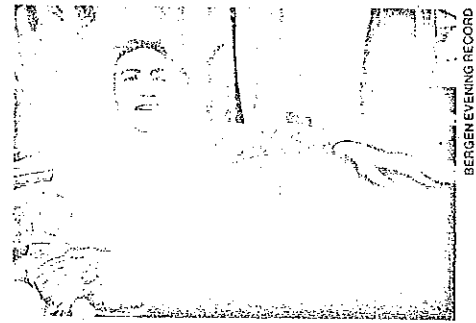
says. "Then we let her talk, because probably no one has listened to her or believed her in years. After a couple of days, we talk about plans. If she has no money, no job, no skills—and most of these women have nothing—we get her on emergency welfare, but it's not our goal to keep anyone on welfare. We try to help the woman find out what direction she wants to move in. We talk to the kids, too, help them understand what's happened, and we get them into a day-care center or a school. Next, we see what we can do for the woman legally. Often, she can go back to her own home if we can get the court to order the husband out. We help her get a job, a place to live, make friends, feel good about herself again. We try to do everything to rebuild her mental and spiritual life, but we let her make the choices."

For about 40 percent of the women, the choice—after an average stay of six weeks—is to go back to their husbands. Sandy feels they do this because many of these women don't like themselves. They feel, think, and act like people who deserve to be abused. And most of them, statistics show, get beaten again. She believes that abusive husbands are weak and frightened men, terrified of losing their wives, but unable to control the violence within them. "If the husbands could get help, proper counseling, the marriages might have a chance. We talk to them if they're willing. But most of these guys are really sick, brought up on machismo and violence."

Sandy has been accused of hating men and trying to break up families. That's ridiculous, she says. She's had good relationships with men, but she doesn't think she will remarry. "My basic commitment is to change. I don't like every day to be the same—eat at six, do the dishes, watch TV, go

to bed at 11. That's just waiting for death. In my life every day is an adventure."

Living this way can often be more difficult for children than for adults, and Sandy admits that her two daughters, aged 17 and 12, and her son, 14, weren't happy about all the people in their house; but she is convinced they do understand and support what she's doing. On occasion, they've even sent needy women to SOS.



Sandy Ramos has helped over 1,000 battered women rebuild their lives.

And they're more independent and self-reliant than most children—of necessity. "They know I'm there if they need me, but they also know that ultimately they're responsible for themselves."

Sandy isn't planning to dedicate the rest of her life to battered women. There are too many other things she wants to do, she says; and when she finds the right person to take over, she'll quit. But she doesn't pretend she'll be easy to replace. "It's just that I never say, 'I can't handle this,' or 'I give up,' I always find a way. And I can think about 20 things at once."

She hopes to travel and to write; but she suspects she'll get involved with some other social problem, "because I care very much. Some people are just born caring." I asked her if she ever feels like giving the whole thing up and going off to some tropical island. "Occasionally. But then a woman calls and needs help, and I just go on."