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Star power turned on in Ringwood to help women's shelter in need

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BY DONNA ROLANDO
Suburban Trends
STAFF WRITER

RINGWOOD – They may not be super heroes, but celebrities and beauty experts are coming to the rescue of Strengthen Our Sisters, a shelter program for homeless/abused women and children, as it struggles to survive a \$500,000 loss in state funds.

With over eight women and children beaten to death every day in America, documentary producer Jacquelyn Aluotto says it's no time for shelters to shut down. Yet that's the trend, Aluotto said, she has witnessed across the nation, through her documentary, and the reason she is joining forces with SOS to host World Peace Begins At Home Sunday, July 18 from 1 to 5:30 p.m. She hopes the success of the fund-raiser may help keep SOS from closing under the heavy weight of its \$500,000 shortfall.

Although domestic violence is a serious topic, touching many lives, World Peace

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Begins At Home promises to be a day of fun, fashion, and Outback dining due to the restaurant's generosity.

Stardust will be sprinkled in the air with appearances by Alexa Prisco and Briella Marie Calafiore, stars of the hit show Jerseylicious, celebrity hair stylist Eric Alt, and Jacqui Phillips, star of the Internet show "Real Beauty Real Women." Phillips will be donating her time to give celebrity makeovers to shelter residents, who will then put on a fashion show. TV and ESPN personality Ashlee Ray will co-host the event at the Highlands Natural Pool, 180 Snake Den Road, Ringwood, where swimming is also in vogue, along with games and raffles. Folks can buy tickets at the gate at \$30 for adults or donate on the Web at sosdv.org.

"If all these shelters close down, these women's options will be go back to their abuser or live on the street," said Aluotto.

Creator of Pick It Up! Pictures, she is using her documentary – "Not In My Backyard" – to tell the story of SOS residents and those at

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other underground shelters, so named because their location is hidden from the public to keep abusers at bay.

"For seven years, I went to underground shelters to show how battered women and children live," she said. "I produce documentaries on social issues to raise awareness and give voiceless victims a voice."

Aluotto, an Edgewater resident, has taken her talent for documentaries and turned it into a fund-raiser for shelters by promising 100 percent of profits from "Not In My Backyard" to shelters in need. (The documentary can be viewed online for \$1 a month.)

And she is encouraging celebrities, artists and others with special talents to turn those talents also into needed revenue for nonprofits like SOS.

"The idea is to have a World Peace Begins At Home event every year for every state," she said. "If the government cannot or will not assist, as a community we need to come together and say we will."

She singled out SOS for today's program because she holds the shelter's programs in high regard, seeing how women gain cars, jobs, and self-esteem to live independently,

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and their children also learn to break the chains of domestic violence and discontinue the cycle.

Although she has many issues she'd like to tackle in her documentaries, Aluotto said domestic violence is a national problem that's on the rise.

"What people don't get is domestic violence is an epidemic. Over 4 million women a day are murdered due to domestic violence and over 2 kids are murdered a day due to abuse," she said. "It's spiraling out of control."

She considers Sandra Ramos, the founder of SOS, a mentor because she started the shelter program when few existed.

Although the 155-bed shelter program has expanded since its 1970 inception, the loss of almost \$500,000 in state funds this year was a devastating blow. The state Department of Children and Families (DCF) withdrew the funds, refusing to pay for anyone who needs to spend more than 60 days at the shelter.

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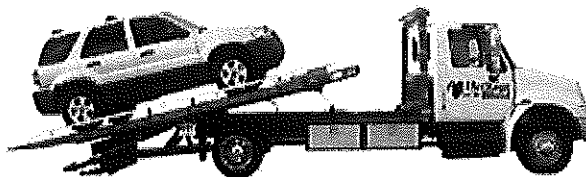
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"How can they get their life in order in 60 days?" Ramos asked, when confronted with the prospect of having to cut short shelter stays.

In a prior interview, a DCF spokeswoman said the state had tried to work with SOS over the years to help it conform to the 60-day limit by transitioning women to independent lives, but in the end, the shelter was minus the revenue.

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