

WEST MILFORD

SOS sends out distress signal over violations

Worries that fines may close them down

BY SHARBARU BOSE
Staff Writer

As they sat clustered beneath the patio umbrella, the ladies of the Carousel House reached an epiphany: sunbathing in a private backyard is far better than lounging on a roadside porch.

"It's like heaven back here," said Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS) Director and Founder Sandra Ramos.

Ironically, Ramos believes that her nonprofit battered women's program is a victim of West Mil-

ford's "NIMBY," or not-in-my-backyard, mentality. For years, town officials have harangued Ramos — the first woman to establish a battered women's shelter in North America — about building and zoning regulations at several West Milford SOS sites, she says.

"Every house that we have has been a struggle," Ramos said.

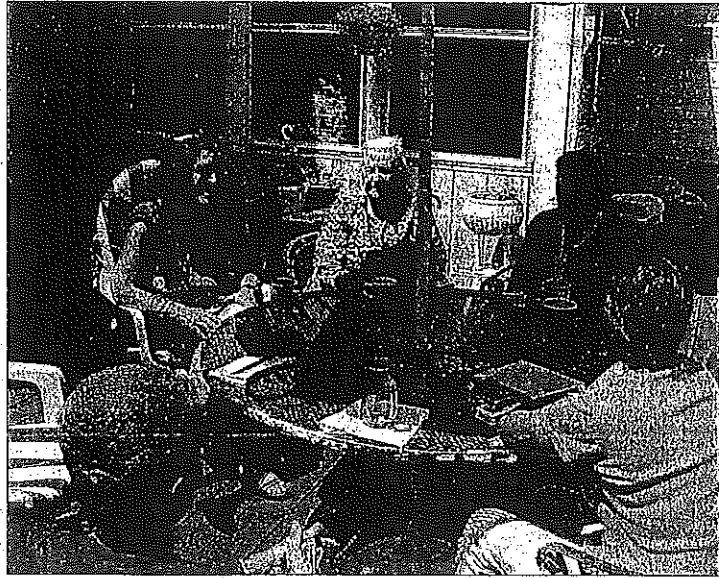
She bought the Carousel House on Old Route 23, previously the Newfoundland Inn Bed & Breakfast, from owner Monika Philippe in December 2002. Local residents soon took up a fight against the allegedly unkempt conditions at Carousel, now the senior SOS shelter. She accuses the township and its residents of unfairly targeting the money-starved SOS.

"When (former councilman) Bob Szuskowski called me last year about stuff in the yard, we cleaned everything up," she said. "We've tried to be good neighbors."

Trouble with the town:

Yet, Councilman Bill Gervens disclosed to the public last month that the township is currently investigating site and health code violations at two separate SOS locations. He spoke again at both the May 27 and June 2 council meetings but did not specifically name the shelter, referring to it as a "group home" instead. The apparent caution stems from his April 29 council report, in which he mistakenly identified the organization.

"We need to take action," Gervens said in April, regarding a septic system leakage at the main shelter on Union Valley Road and a missing certificate of occupancy



STAFF PHOTO/SHARBARU BOSE

Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS) Director Sandra Ramos with her residents at the Carousel House on Old Route 23. Top from left: Ramos, Dolores Loughweed, and Ruth Parker. Unseen at bottom: Isabelle Torella (l) and "house mother" Monika Philippe (r). West Milford Township officials recently delivered a summons to the nonprofit organization for two separate site violations.

(C.O.) at the senior shelter. Philippe, who is currently the housemother at Carousel, said there had been a fire at the building just before SOS purchased it. The organization got a certificate of occupancy soon after renovations, but the township told Ramos that she would need a change of use to reflect the home's new boarding house status. Ramos says however that its use as a bed and breakfast hasn't changed.

"I didn't know she (Ramos) was a licensed construction official," responded Kurt Wagner, head of the township's Building Department, last Friday. "Fact is, the change involves a lot — installation of sprinklers, fire escapes, and fire alarms..."

Wagner said that SOS has been in violation since February 2003 and the organization has incurred a \$500 fine each week for over a year. SOS needs to establish a boarding home usage for a proper

losing Carousel. "Nobody wants us in our neighborhoods. That's so unfair."

Gervens' call for action against the SOS landed in the May 5 issue of *The Greenwood Lake News* and forced Loughweed to write a letter to don't have money to feed the women," Ramos said. George Cotz, who is representing SOS for free, told Judge George Cluff at a May 20 court hearing that the April zoning board of adjustment (ZBA) meeting lacked a quorum on a pending use variance application. While not synonymous, the use variance and change of use are "tangentially related," Cotz later said. If the ZBA denies the variance, it could place the C.O. in jeopardy. Yet, if the variance is approved, SOS could still be guilty of not having the proper C.O.

Though five out seven board members were present, SOS required a majority of five votes to get the variance approved. Cotz argued that it was unreasonable to expect all five members to vote unanimously. He rejected a monetary plea bargain offered by the prosecution on May 20 and won a brief postponement in court.

At the next May 25 zoning board meeting, Cotz said that by state statute, a battered women's shelter can't be precluded from a residential area by forcing a use variance upon it. The ZBA also adjourned the matter until the end of June. (The council still hasn't appointed a full quorum to the ZBA.)

More trouble

The May 20 court appearance also related to a summons issued by the health department for a septic overflow at the main SOS shelter, which is a health hazard that needs an immediate correction, Judge Cluff said. If found guilty for overflow, SOS may be subject to a \$1,000 fine — an amount it paid last year when faced with the same charge.

Ellen Kenny, director of SOS shelter operations, said it took a considerable amount of time to find a contractor willing to work in West Milford where obtaining upgrade permits is sometimes a lengthy process. Also, out of a list of 32 contractors provided by the township, Kenny found only one willing to assess the damage without charge: Mike Farruggia, from EarthCare's All-County Division.

While the problem at the main shelter is admittedly a large one, Farruggia said that Ramos shouldn't be fined. "Why not help her raise the

"The article says that Council President William Gervens is concerned about the health and safety of the people. Well, we want everyone to know that if it had not been for the help we received from Strengthen Our Sisters and the safety of the Sunflower House, some of us would likely be dead."

—Dolores Loughweed
author of letter in reply to Gervens' anti-S.O.S.
Greenwood Lake News article.

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