



ED HILL / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## HONORS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS CRUSADER

May 27, 2001  
Section: NEWS  
Edition: All Editions  
Page: N1

Sandra Ramos speaking at Ramapo College after receiving a \$50,000 **Russ Berrie Award** for Making a Difference.

The Record  
by ELAINE D'AURIZIO  
Column: FROM THE FRONT LINE

## HONORS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS CRUSADER

Sandra Ramos was elated but stunned.

"Usually people don't award me things, they yell at me," she joked after learning she'd won the honor.

They've done a lot more than yell at her. Ramos has been cursed at, called names, threatened with jail, and fined for contempt of court during her 30-year crusade to help battered women. She only wanted their due - shelter, welfare benefits, legal protection - until they could get on their feet.

"I can't stand injustice, and nobody was doing anything," Ramos said.

But like most advocates cutting a swath, Ramos has had to fight hard and long to get people to listen.

The resistance never daunted the high-spirited and outspoken Ramos, who followed her heart in 1970 and began taking battered women and their children into her Hackensack home because they had no place to go. She housed hundreds over the years, defied court orders to remove them, threatened legal action, and pestered freeholders until she won Bergen County funds in 1978 for the first shelter for abused women in the country.

Shelter Our Sisters in Bergen County was followed by halfway homes and another shelter in Passaic County, Strengthen Our Sisters, of which Ramos is director.

"Everything that happened was in response to a need that arose," Ramos said. "We were always overcrowded. Some women still have nowhere to go."

For her tireless grass-roots crusading, which opened the public's eyes to the plight of abused

women, Ramos on Wednesday received the top honor - and \$50,000 - among 19 winners of the Russ Berrie Award for Making a Difference at Ramapo College.

"She continues her work as director of SOS, working 12- to 15-hour days, still making middle-of-the-night rescues and going to court to make sure restraining orders are granted," said Steve Aduato, the television host who presented the awards. "She is truly an unsung hero to thousands of women and children whose lives she has impacted through her dedication and commitment."

Ramos, who has three grown children, did not expect the honor.

"I can't believe it," said Ramos, who is putting the money into her Passaic County shelter. Dressed typically and with flair in secondhand clothes from the shelter's thrift shop, she said she prayed for money to buy a badly needed house that sits next to another in the shelter program.

"It's a miracle, exactly the amount we needed so we can buy the house," she said.

Ramos, who takes home a modest \$22,000 for her round-the-clock job as shelter director, never sought material wealth.

"I don't care about money; I never did. But the shelter is always struggling and women and children can't find affordable housing," she said.

So the \$50,000 is sorely needed. So is the federal grant secured in February by Sen. Robert G. Torricelli, D-N.J., to help establish a program to house elderly homeless women, many of whom were abused.

"It's a horrible existence if they don't have any money and no place to turn to," Ramos said.

It has been said that the duration - not intensity - of sentiment is what makes great men and women. The tenacious and impassioned Ramos qualifies on both counts.

"When I see something that is wrong, I have to stand up for it," she said. "I just keep plugging until what's needed to be done gets done."

Ramos says much still needs to be done to help abused women. And who would know better than this front-line, hands-on crusader about the psychological, economic, and legal struggles abused women still face?

"I see women who are suicidal and depressed and the children who grow up in dysfunctional homes where their mothers went for protection and didn't have adequate representation," Ramos said.

Ramos said batterers are learning to use the system and that 93 percent of men who go for custody of their children get it.

"If somebody has a \$400-an-hour lawyer and the other a volunteer attorney with a gigantic caseload, who wins?" she said.

She said many judges are knowledgeable about the law - including some laws spawned by her persistence.

"But they do not understand the dynamics of domestic violence or why a woman would go in front of them and be paralyzed," she said. "Women are still getting battered by the court system, the economic system, and the lack of affordable housing."

Knowing the women's needs, Ramos enlisted therapists to help empower them. She established job training programs and asked people to donate old cars so the women can get to their jobs and day care. For all she did - and continues to do - it is never enough.

"I'd like to be able to put myself out of business," she said.

That is unlikely, because the need exceeds the number of shelters in the state, Ramos said.

"Twenty or 30 aren't enough to provide the services needed," she said. "Most shelters permit women to stay 30 to 90 days, which is not enough time for them to get their lives together and become independent."

The compassionate earth-mother Ramos, who has insisted on running her shelters in a non-bureaucratic and family-style manner, has been honored by President Ronald Reagan and state and local legislators for her work. Forthright and principled, she is the same "revolutionary" she was 30 years ago. She is still speaking up for those who cannot in the middle of the night or in court.

"They're still giving lip service to battered women," said Ramos, who once handed out pink paper lips to Bergen County freeholders for saying they understood but failing to allocate funds for a women's shelter.

"They're more polished now, but women are still walking out of court crying and petrified," she said. "A lot of women get temporary restraining orders, but judges are still not granting final restraining orders."

Ramos, who holds both bachelor's and master's degrees, has for five years taught a course at Ramapo College called "Dynamics of Domestic Violence."

"We talk about the real deal, what the law says and what actually happens," she said. "The law is supposed to protect women, but it ends up nullifying them. Abused women are not good witnesses, and they don't allow advocates to support them in court. They go in alone shaking and horrified."

Ramos was charged with contempt of court recently for refusing to leave the side of a terrified battered woman who did not speak English well. Ramos ultimately moved to the back of the courtroom but was fined \$50.

"I can't stand hypocrisy, but it is deeply rooted," she said. "There is a lot of awareness, but women are still being killed in their homes, children are still the victims of incest and having

their lives destroyed by judges who give batterers custody."

The high-energy Ramos sleeps about five hours a day, swims, meditates, and prays in between a dizzying schedule. Yet she insists she would have no problem basking on a beach.

"I don't have a compulsion to work," she said. "But when I see injustice, I just can't watch and not do anything. I know some people don't like what I am saying, but I feel a moral obligation to serve battered women. It just seems like a calling, a mission."

Staff Writer Elaine D'Aurizio's e-mail address is [daurizio\(at\)northjersey.com](mailto:daurizio@northjersey.com)