

Suburban shelter finds a car is the key

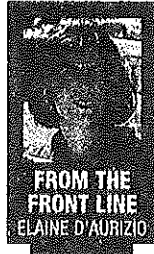
It makes perfect sense.

To be independent, battered women need job training ... education ... day care for their children. And they need a way to get to those places.

In other words, they need wheels.

That's especially true in suburban North Jersey, where public transportation is scarce. In some places, it's nearly non-existent.

So Sandra Ramos, executive director and founder of Strengthen Our Sisters, a battered women's shelter in West Milford, is asking folks to donate cars to the shelter.



In a way, it's like donating food and clothing — only the benefits are bigger. "Not only does it help the women get off welfare, it also helps the donor with a tax deduction for the full value of the car, which is often more money than the asking price for selling the vehicle," Ramos said.

Abused women who stay at shelters receive welfare funds. But the state's Work First Program demands that welfare mothers get off public assistance within two years. Problem is, how do you travel the road to independence with no means of transpor-

tation?

"That's one important factor that the designers of the initiative left out," Ramos said. "If you have a chauffeur and a car, you're all right."

While good in theory, Ramos said the initiative lacks "a day-to-day understanding of what a welfare mother needs."

"They forgot you have to get from home to work, but before that, you have to go to day care. Most of the women can't get from their apartments to work." Cars make women mobile and independent of the shelter, Ramos said. About 30 vehicles have been donated since the shelter kicked off its

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Car Donation Program a few months ago.

It doesn't matter how old the cars are or what they look like — they just have to run.

Natalie, a shelter mom, doesn't care that the Chevy Citation she got five weeks ago is a 1984 model. It gets her to computer training classes in Bergen County where her test scores are in the high 90s. She hopes to find a job in computer sales or pharmaceutical sales.

The car is helping to give her the independence to build a bright future. An abused child who became an abused wife, Natalie fled to the shelter last year after being brutally assaulted by her mate.

"My life has completely turned around," said the mother of two. "Now I have people in my corner. I've learned persistence from Sandy, and the car really helps. Without it, I wouldn't be able to go to school. I'm now looking for a part-time job waitressing, and I'll need the car for that too. I've given other women rides and even use it to go to church."

The shelter helps Natalie with car insurance, but she pays for repairs.

"I need two front tires and a front-end alignment," she said. "But I'm able to get organized and have a schedule. It's psychologically uplifting. The car is making my life normal."

Joanne and Mitch Kahn of Ringwood will be happy to know that. They donated a 1987 Honda Civic to the shelter.

"The car runs really well," said Mitch Kahn, director of the social work program at Ramapo College.

Kahn said he and his wife have known Ramos, who also teaches at Ramapo, and her work for years. "It's good, important work," he said. "We wanted to do something to support that."

When they bought a new Audi, the Kahns could have sold their Civic, which had a book value of \$3,000. But Kahn felt lucky if he got half that.

They opted to donate.

"We wanted to help these people out, to give them a start," Kahn said. "And there's even a bonus. You can get as significant a tax deduction as you could for the sale of your car. If the shelter can use it, great. If they can't, they can sell it." A few have been sold to help fund the shelter.

en who are motivated, such as Natalie and Tina (who asked that her real name be withheld). Tina, 18, is studying for her driver's license and the car donation program is helping her with that. A part-time job in the shelter's daycare center pays the car insurance.

A straight-A student, Tina won a scholarship to a private college where she plans to study elementary education. "The car means a lot to me," she said. "Without it, there would be no way to get to the college."

If anyone knows the day-to-day needs of abused women, it is Ramos, who founded one of the first two battered woman's shelters in the United States. For almost 30 years, she has provided shelter, support, and encouragement to abused women while she raises public awareness of their plight.

It's been a hard fight for the hands-on, grass-roots advocate who started taking battered women with no place to go into her Hackensack home in 1970. Ramos marched, staged sit-ins, threatened legal action, and defied court orders until 1977, when she finally won funding for a women's shelter in Teaneck.

Eight years later, she was battling the shelter's board of directors over how the shelter should be run. She said it was losing heart, had become rigid, and was not meeting the needs of the women. In 1986, she was fired from Shelter Our Sisters, the home she had fought so hard to form.

But Ramos was nearly a legend by then, honored by President Ronald Reagan and state and local legislators. Abused women still sought her help and compassion — and again she took them in. In 1986, she founded the West Milford shelter.

Throughout the years, Ramos has taxied thousands of abused women to court, to work, to school, and to visit their children.

"The biggest albatross is ridea," Ramos said last week. "We spend \$100,000 a year on travel, and we don't have the money."

Every morning a shelter van taxies women to Hackensack and Paterson for job training and work and to look for apartments. They needed a new one.

A shelter worker saw a van for sale six months ago and the owner was asked if he would donate it.

tered it at the Division of Motor Vehicles in Englewood, it caught the interest of Gloria Feldman, who runs the office for the state.

A longtime admirer of Ramos and her cause, Feldman told Ramos she knew people who might want to donate cars. She suggests Ramos make a flier for the bulletin board saying how the vehicle would help and explaining that the donor would get a tax deduction.

"It starts to take off," Feldman said. "Friends donated cars. People would come in to register a car see the flier, and they would donate."

Then Feldman sent fliers to other DMV agencies.

"Anything I can do to help Sandra, I will do," Feldman said. "Women have to have a better in age of themselves and driving a car helps give them that. It's a step in the right direction. It makes them self-sufficient."

The shelter is applying for grant to pay for registering the cars, insurance, and repairs. "It's important to provide people with the things they need to get on their feet, and there's a wide range of things that are needed," Ramos said.

Cars connect so many of the needs.

"If you don't care for all the needs of a woman, you doom the to failure," Ramos said.

Anyone interested in donating a car Strengthen Our Sisters may call (97) 728-7835.