

Suburban Trends

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SOS gets grant for thrift shop

By MATT FAGAN
Staff Writer

WEST MILFORD — Five years after the murder of Valerie Van Dunk, Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS), a local woman's shelter, received a \$125,000 state grant to help them try to prevent the same thing from happening to other women.

This money will be used to improve its job skills program for its clients and purchase its thrift store property in hopes of providing the shelter and its clients a stable form of income, officials said.

According to Sandra Ramos, who helped found the shelter and serves as its executive director, the money is part of the state's model economic development program that will enable SOS to give women the job skills they need to become financially independent. It was largely because Van Dunk was economically dependent on her batterer, Donald De Freese, that led to her murder, she said.

A \$100,000 of the money will go toward a down payment for securing a mortgage on its 196 Lincoln Ave. thrift store called Treasures, A Fun Place To Shop, state officials said. Owing the store should help provide SOS with a financial base, Ramos said.

"We've been struggling for so long," Ramos said. "We don't want to have to beg to get food for our clients. We want to be self-supporting."

A portion of the money will be used to add offices to the thrift shop as a resource area for their clients, many of whom come from battered or abusive situations, so they, too, can find jobs so they can be self-sufficient, she said.

"We want to see women leave the

shelter and live independently," Ramos said.

According to Tom Damm, DCA spokesman, \$25,000 of the money will be used to repair the roof and provide a new cellar floor, as well as help SOS set up offices in the thrift shop. Here clients will send out resumes, learn computer skills, and send and receive phone calls, he said.

"It was determined that the thrift store was an important source of income for Shelter our Sisters," Damm said. "The money comes from the DCA's shelter support fund."

Ramos said the cost of buying the building was \$170,000 and that the mortgage of \$70,000 was given to them by Valley National Bank as part of its Community Reinvestment program. They are planning to buy the building from Catherine and Charles DeCaeser.

Currently Ramos says her shelter has 57 clients ages from 17-80.

"We have one 80-year-old who got burned out her home," Ramos said, adding that they decided to take her in despite the fact she was not technically battered. "We try not to get too bureaucratic around here. I'm an old hippie."

"She said that in addition to the boost they got from the DCA, someone donated a \$4,000 IBM personal computer to help them teach computer skills to their clients. The Pas-saic Valley Board of Realtors is also holding a raffle of 1998 BMW to help raise money for a truck to haul goods to their thrift store. The truck will also serve to help them take some of the items from the store which they donate to woman ready to start over move into new apartments. The furniture gives them a leg up for women who often have nothing, she said.

"Our thrift store has loads of wonderful stuff," Ramos said.

For more information about the shelter call 728-2506.

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