

Battered women finding refuge

By Craig Reiss
Staff Writer

A Smith pretended to be asleep on the living room couch, only an hour after her husband of 14 years had beaten her with a leather strap.

She heard her husband pull a chair up beside her, then felt the barrel of the gun he put to her head.

"He kept whispering, 'Pow, pow, pow,'" Ms. Smith said. "I panicked at first, but then I almost didn't care if he did shoot me. I had no life, no will, no concept of who I was. I was always taught that a wife was meant to serve her husband, and if he beat you, it was because you weren't being a good wife."

With a gun to her head, though, Ms. Smith (not her real name) decided to take her four children and leave her husband. She went to Shelter Our Sisters (SOS) in Hackensack — an organization formed to help battered women and their children — and became one of more than 1,000 battered women in Bergen County to seek help in the past several months.

SOS consists of a network of private homes — mostly those of former battered women — where women like Ms. Smith can live free of charge and try to readjust in the traumatic days after they leave their husbands. The organization, the first of its kind in North America, dates back to 1971, when Sandy Ramos, a Hackensack feminist known for her blunt speech and pugna-cious manner, opened her home to battered wives.

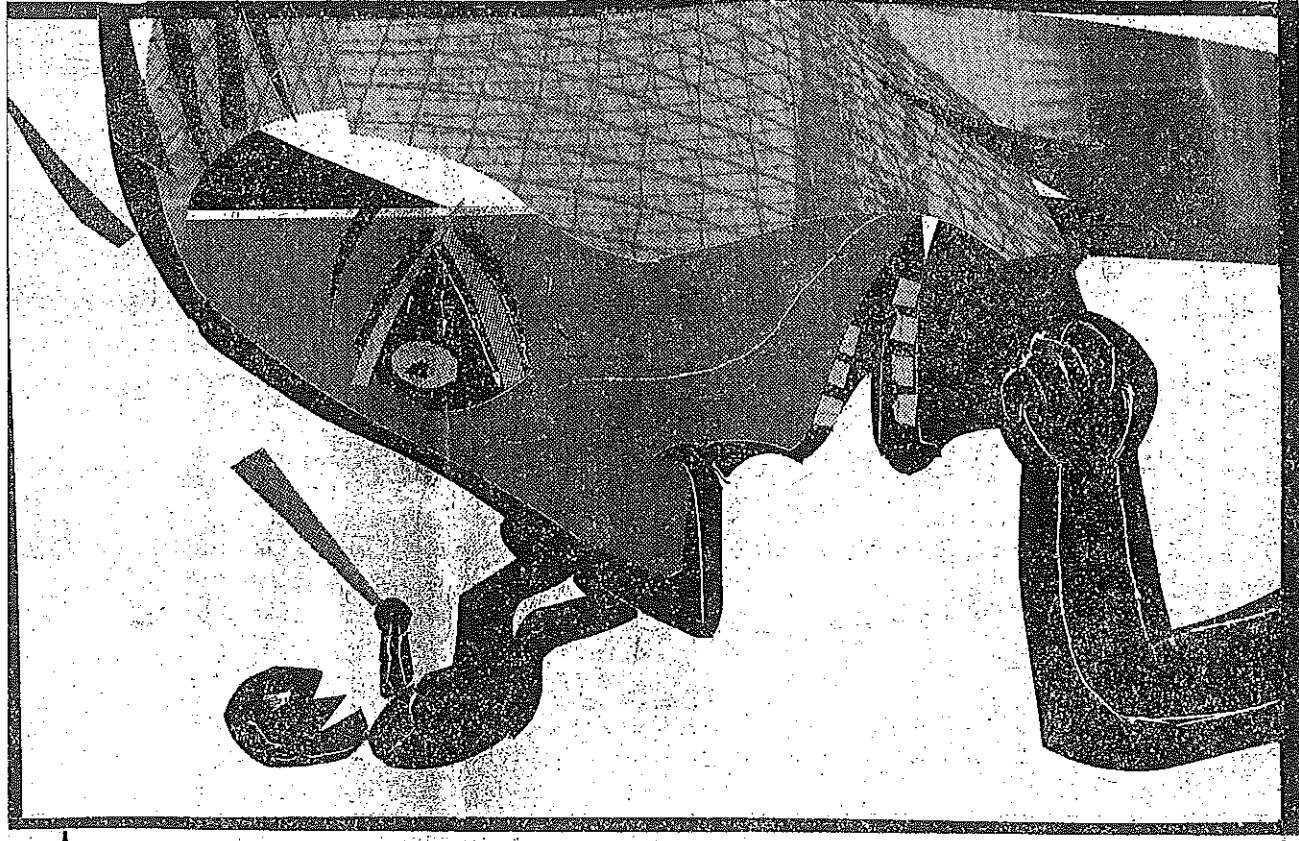
One other program

The only other program serving battered women in Bergen County is the Victims of Domestic Violence Project, sponsored by the county Community Action Program (CAP). As an arm of CAP, the county's antipoverty jobs agency, it is financed by county and federal government funds.

Since starting last June, the CAP program, which takes a more institutional approach to aiding battered women, has housed more than 85 women in a medium-priced Bergen County motel and has counseled 113 others in group therapy programs. SOS, less organized in its bookkeeping, offers no similar statistics, but it claims from December through February to have received 693 calls from distressed women on its hot line.

CAP operates out of two locations — the motel and an office suite in Hackensack — where the therapy sessions are conducted.

Ms. Smith stayed at Ms. Ramos's



Graphics by Bill Hogan

Hackensack home. There, she became part of a communal family with several other battered women, former battered women now serving as SOS counselors, and the children from these broken homes.

Each day, counselors spent hours talking with Ms. Smith, telling her of their own difficulties upon leaving their husbands and making Ms. Smith feel neither unique nor alone.

"My husband used to control my entire life," Ms. Smith said. "Everything I did, I needed his approval. He defined what was right and wrong. When I left him, I left his values — which were my own then — behind. That left me very insecure and afraid."

The experience left Ms. Smith's 14-year-old daughter bitter and resentful toward her mother. SOS counselors stepped in to bring the two back together. They convinced the daughter that Ms. Smith left her husband, not for selfish reasons, but because she feared the constant fighting within the family would leave its mark on her children.

Counselors new arrivals

After two months, Ms. Smith found work and moved out on her own with her children. In gratitude to SOS and because of her sympathy for women in a similar plight, Sarah now counsels new arrivals at SOS shelters.

Both CAP and SOS seek to provide a safe and comforting place where battered women can get away from their husbands. CAP estimates that more than a third of its clients eventually return to their husbands; SOS says about

25 per cent of its women go back. But the CAP and SOS programs differ drastically in their approaches and philosophies.

For several years, SOS's only counselor was Sandy Ramos, a 36-year-old divorcée with three children who says she herself was not beaten by her ex-husband. Her influence still prevails, although SOS has expanded from Ms. Ramos's home to its network of houses.

Ms. Ramos's commitment to feminism grew out of her involvement with the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements of the 1960s. She gained a reputation as a radical.

She opened her home to battered women after her divorce. With no government or outside support, she financed her efforts entirely through T-shirt sales, small fund-raising efforts, and her own salary as a waitress. Neither Ms. Ramos nor any other SOS worker has been paid for her efforts. CAP pays salaries to its workers.

SOS has no rules nor qualifications for entering one of the shelter-homes. The battered wives pay nothing, and can stay as long as they need help. The volunteers counsel from their own experiences as battered women. They generally have no academic training in the field of domestic violence.

CAP takes a less free-wheeling approach. Since it was established last June, it has been operated through a one-year, \$174,000 federal grant — although the project has already spent

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Battered women find two ports of refuge

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han \$100,000 above that amount. ference has been paid with other antipoverty funds.

oman entering the CAP shelter sign a contract and is expected to he shelter within four weeks, un- r life is still seriously threatened, charged \$3 a day for staying at elter, and an additional \$3 for hild over 12. For children under rate is \$1.50 a day.

officials point out, however, that ey maintain that no woman is re- shelter because of inability to

ie CAP motel, each woman has a te room where she stays with her n. All the women are housed in le wing of the motel, and are en- ed to talk with each other, espe- in the therapy sessions at the nsack office. They are free to and go from the motel.

of the 14 CAP workers either r are working toward degrees in work. The executive director, Na-Webb, was a social worker han- dled abuse cases for the Michigan government before coming East ar.

re also appears to be a class dif- e between the two programs.

Eisen, chairman of the nber CAP advisory board and a er of the Ridgewood chapter of ational Organization for Women, that middle- and upper-income

women would be reluctant to stay at an SOS home because the houses are not as well kept as the CAP motel.

Replies Ms. Ramos: "I didn't know we were running a floor waxing contest here."

To SOS, it is a source of pride to be too busy meeting the needs of battered women to take time to keep house.

CAP officials believe that an ordered, stable approach is more likely to assist battered wives in making their transi- tions. SOS shuns the institutional at- mosphere as reflecting the same emphasis on conventional structure that got the

"My husband used to control my entire life. Everything I did, I needed his approval. He defined what was right and wrong."

—A battered wife

women to accept beatings in the first place. It also detracts from the kind of genuine interaction that is so helpful to the women, SOS maintains.

Last year, however, SOS decided to risk some of its free, unstructured ap- proach in exchange for state and feder- al funding. In May, Ms. Ramos went be- fore the Bergen County Board of Freeholders to ask that they sponsor SOS's bid for this government money.

Clad in blue jeans and T-shirt, Ms. Ra- mos delivered a boisterous political har- rangue, reprimanding the freeholders

for failing to share her sense of urgency in dealing with battered women.

The freeholders, offended by Ms. Ramos's demeanor and dress, reacted angrily. Freeholder Harry Gerecke de- scribed the SOS leader as "a self-styled expert in confrontation politics." Free- holder D. Bennett Mazur called Ms. Ra- mos an "animal," and vowed that the board would never deal with her or SOS.

At a subsequent freeholder meeting, Ms. Ramos presented each freeholder with a pair of pink paper lips, symboliz- ing the lip service she said the board had paid to the issue of battered wom- en. Since then, Ms. Ramos, following the advice of her 11-member advisory board and Freeholder-Director Jere- miah F. O'Connor, has not appeared personally before the freeholders to argue SOS's position. Frances Treanor, an official with the Social Security Administration and an SOS adviser, has become SOS's public spokeswoman.

As a result of the freeholders' initial outrage over Ms. Ramos, the board di- rected John Lyle, executive director of CAP, to seek federal funding for a coun- ty-run shelter. Lyle subsequently set up the CAP program.

Six months later, the freeholders, in an apparent turnabout, agreed to spon- sor SOS's bid for a \$75,000 state grant, which required the county to put up more than \$18,000 of its own money. The freeholders also approved an SOS plan to buy a house for a permanent shelter with \$75,000 in federal Community De- velopment (CD) funds. Contracts for

the state grant are now being drafted, and the CD funds should be available for the house this summer.

What caused the freeholders to change their position is not entirely clear. The biggest flip-flop on SOS has come from O'Connor. Originally an- gered by Ms. Ramos's belligerence be- fore the board, O'Connor has become SOS's biggest champion among the free- holders.

"There's nothing inconsistent in my position," O'Connor said. "When I first came in contact with SOS, I wasn't fully aware of everything they had accom- plished. And I'm impressed with the ad- visory board they've put together. I don't agree with Sandy's confrontation politics, but sometimes, dammit, that's what's needed to get the ball rolling."

Mrs. Eisen, among other CAP ad- visory board members, has been outspo- kenly critical of O'Connor's change in position. She says the freeholders have given no support to CAP's efforts to find a permanent shelter, and maintains that the pressure tactics of SOS have di- verted the board's support from the county's own program. Why would the freeholders back a freewheeling, inde- pendent group when they have their own program accountable directly to the board? Mrs. Eisen asks rhetorically.

"I haven't abandoned anybody," O'Connor said. "I am tired of these [CAP] people saying I've betrayed them and telling me what to do. We're the elected officials, and it's time they started listening to what we want."

O'Connor has pledged that the CAP program will be funded again this year.

The political haggings pitting CAP against SOS have led to open animosity between the two groups. Leaders of each voice contempt for the other.

SOS claims that CAP is profiting from the work that SOS did long before domestic violence was recognized as an important phenomenon. While CAP representatives say they recognize an indebtedness to Ms. Ramos's foresight and dedication — Mrs. Eisen acknowl- edges that many of CAP's advisers be- came aware of the battered women's

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problem through Ms. Ramos — CAP of- ficials say that SOS is limited in its abil- ity to relate to a broad spectrum of women in need.

At freeholder meetings where funding of battered women's shelters are dis- cussed, representatives from CAP and SOS sit on opposite sides of the free- holders' chambers and glare at each other. Sometimes, the sessions dissolve into bitter arguments.

Before one freeholder meeting, Mrs. Eisen and Eleanor Clark, another CAP

advisory board member, threatened to quit the CAP program if a resolution giving funds to SOS wasn't tabled. The freeholders withdrew the resolution for two weeks, but passed it two weeks later.

That resolution ordered SOS and CAP to agree on a formula that would pre- vent duplication of each other's efforts. A meeting was held between the two groups, but they simply agreed that they wouldn't house the same women simultaneously.

Each program, though, provides many similar features. These include:

- A 24-hour hot line which women can call for advice, assistance, and di- rection. The CAP number is 487-8484, and SOS's is 342-1185.

- Child care services. Children can be dropped off at the CAP program's Hackensack office for the day while the mother is at the welfare office or seek- ing a job or apartment. The service is comparable to baby-sitting. With SOS, the children are cared for as if they were members of the family with which the mother is staying. There is no for- mal system for child care.

- Legal consultation. CAP has a consultant who offers legal advice. SOS does the same, although neither group provides attorneys in court.

- Group therapy sessions. Both programs have regular therapy ses- sions, with 10 to 15 women sharing expe- riences and developing peer support.