

Firing of shelter's founder upheld

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HACKENSACK — A Superior Court judge yesterday ruled that the board of directors of a group of shelters for battered women acted properly in firing its administrator.

Sandy Ramos, the founder and former executive director of Shelter Our Sisters (SOS), had charged in a lawsuit that the board had not followed proper procedure in dismissing her in January 1986. But Judge Sherwin Lester agreed with the board's contention that Ms. Ramos was an "employee at will," and could be fired without a hearing or charges.

Her lawyer, Frank Lucianna, said Ms. Ramos will appeal.

Ms. Ramos, who was the executive director of SOS for seven years, had argued she was fired because she made public her opposition to board policy that required psychological counseling for shelter residents. She said the dismissal was discriminatory and that it violated her First Amendment rights to free

speech.

But Lester disagreed, and added that, in matters of policy, it is up to the board of directors to set standards.

"One does not undermine and insult the intelligence of your boss if you want to keep your job," Lester said. "I find that's what happened here."

Marvin Gladstone, an attorney for SOS, said he was delighted with the ruling.

"Ms. Ramos has the liberty to stand on a soapbox," he said. "But to try to convert that into life tenure [with SOS] would be an abortion of the First Amendment. The only issue that has been here from the beginning is whether or not she was an employee at will."

Ms. Ramos also said she would pursue charges of libel and slander against SOS stemming from a letter by the board listing reasons she was fired.

The reasons, which included sexual misconduct and mismanagement, became public during hearings on whether Ms. Ramos should collect unemployment insurance. Her benefits

were challenged by the SOS board of directors.

In her fight to change policy that made counseling mandatory for shelter residents, Ms. Ramos went to the press, and solicited help from politicians who supported her.

SOS, a private, nonprofit shelter system for battered women, is based in Teaneck. It operates four shelters in Teaneck, Bogota, and Ramsey.

Throughout the trial, Lester said he admired Ms. Ramos and her commitment to battered women, and yesterday he called her a "remarkable woman."

"It is too bad that well-wishing people cannot get together and do it [help battered women] in a joint effort," he said.

Ms. Ramos, who started SOS by taking battered women into her home 15 years ago, said that if she loses the appeal, she will consider founding another shelter.

"I came to the law looking for justice," she said. "I got law but I didn't get justice."