

# Women's advocacy center opens

## A march against violence

### 'Never another battered woman'

By Corky Siemaszko  
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The day before a new state law gives authorities more power to pursue cases of domestic violence, relatives and friends of a West Milford woman who was killed by her former boyfriend marched through the township Monday — on what would have been her 31st birthday — to protest violence in the home.

"Never another battered woman!" the mostly female group of 60 chanted as they walked two miles through the damp cold from West Milford's police station to the new Valerie Van Dunk Advocacy Center in the Hewitt section.

Inside, they remembered Van Dunk and other victims of domestic violence. "Happy birthday, Val," said her sister, Rhonda Luke of Butler.

Last month, in a house only a stone's throw from the new center, Van Dunk was shot to death, as her two daughters watched, by an abusive ex-boyfriend who then turned his gun on himself. Although she had filed 11 complaints against Donald DeFreese since 1988, Van Dunk had refused to pursue any of them, police said.

Sandra Ramos, director of the Strengthen Our Sisters program in West Milford, said Van Dunk — like many battered women — had little faith that the system would protect her if she had pressed charges. The Domestic Violence Prevention Act, which takes effect today, "came too late for Valerie," Ramos said.

The law gives authorities more power to take action when there is probable cause to believe violence has occurred. It also obligates them to pursue a domestic violence case even if the victim is reluctant.

"It's still only as good as its enforcement," said Ramos. "Under the old law, police would be more active if a woman was mugged by a stranger. Women just didn't trust the system to protect them."

Luke, 22, complained that newspaper articles "criticized my sister for not press-

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ing charges. The thing everybody forgot was that she was the victim."

Luke's mother, Doris, cut the baby-blue ribbon at 2019 Greenwood Lake Turnpike to officially open the center. Located in what was once a secondhand clothing and furniture store, it is designed to "be a place where women can meet and discuss ways of doing something about domestic violence," said Ramos. Beginning today, the center will be open

from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and can be reached by calling 728-8650. A 24-hour hot line, 728-0007, also is available.

As other victims of domestic violence talked about their experiences, Van Dunk's 13-year-old daughter, Jessica, who witnessed her mother's killing, stayed close to her grandmother on Monday. Van Dunk's four other sisters took part in the march along with one of her two brothers.

"Women deserve to be treated as queens and goddesses," Ramos said to hearty ap-

plause. Women who live in West Milford's shelter for battered women then read poems in memory of Van Dunk and told their own stories.

Still smiling, but nevertheless moved by the tribute, Luke thanked everyone on behalf of her family and volunteered to teach an aerobics class at the center.

"I just hope that something comes out of this . . . so my sister didn't die for no purpose," she said.