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Still standing by the battered

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By Elaine D'Aurizio

She's been honored by President Ronald Reagan and state and local legislators. Last year, cable channel America's Talking anointed her "a great American hero."

Yet 25 years after she founded the first shelter for battered women in North America, Sandra Ramos is still the same hands-on, grass-roots advocate she's always been.

Trying to interview her is like trying to pin down a wave on the sand. One minute she's soothing a crying child, the next she's ushering in a new arrival. Later she'll play taxi driver to somebody needing a ride. If an abused woman needs annually - and champion - in court or is in danger at 3 a.m., Ramos is the one she'll want at her side. As usual, Ramos will run.

You can count on it, just as you can count on her pestering for money - funds she believes the battered women she champions are entitled to.

A quarter of a century after she took the first abused woman into her Hackensack home, her compassion runs as deep as it always did. So does her determination to free women and children from violence and to empower them.

And it is the duration of sentiment, as much as the strength of it, that is awesome about Ramos.

"Sometimes I get tired," admits Ramos, now 55. "But I get invigorated knowing I am doing what I have to do, what I feel in my heart, my soul, spirit, and my conscience is the right thing to do." Ramos had already been leading the cause 17 years when in 1988 former Gov. Thomas Kean declared October "Domestic Violence Awareness Month."

Her style has remained consistent since, right down to the second-hand clothes and 1977 Volvo she drives. For spiritual strength and guidance, Ramos meditates twice a day. A dizzying schedule and daily swim keep her in shape.

The woman who helped get the movement off the ground sees supporting battered women and trying to create a more nurturing world as "a mission."

"As long as we have society where children are beaten, raped, and molested and women are not respected or loved, everyone has a moral obligation to do something about it," she said.

Ramos did something about it in 1970 when she first took a battered woman into her home. The number had grown to 22 when a building code inspector appeared on her Hackensack doorstep because of complaints. Ramos was holding T-shirt sales and working day and night as a waitress to feed and clothe families until they got back on their feet. But some neighbors, she said, didn't want abused women and their kids living on the block.

"Well, you've got them," Ramos answered. "They're in other homes on this street and I know that because they've been here." She was threatened with jail but refused to throw the families out. Domestic violence was a private, family affair hushed into non-existence then. Ramos knew better. And she knew what to call it: inhumane and unjust.

For the next six years, she marched, staged sit-ins, threatened legal action, defied court orders. She drew jeers for her confrontational style and speaking about the unspoken. She divorced and raised three children, now grown, and completed an undergraduate degree from Ramapo College and a master's degree in applied urban anthropology from City College of New York.

A child of the Sixties, the confrontational Ramos often used theatrics to drive home the need. When the Bergen County freeholders denied financial assistance of battered women but awarded \$500,000 to build a dog shelter, Ramos brought a battered woman and her dog to the next meeting.

"Can she stay at the animal shelter with her dog?" she asked. "She has nowhere to go."

Ramos' tenacity paid off in 1977 when she finally won funding for a battered women's shelter in Teaneck. Shelter Our Sisters was the first in the country. Three transitional houses, designed to ready families to go on their own, followed in Ramsey, Bogota, and Leonia. But by 1985, she was battling the shelter's board of directors. It was grass-roots feminist against regimented professionals, earth mother vs. establishment.

A shelter administrator at the time called Ramos "stubborn, overprotective, uncompromising." The way Ramos saw it, her shelter had become "bureaucratized, boardified."

"It was losing heart, had become rigid and cold, and wasn't meeting the everyday needs of the women," she said. "I was worried about the lack of individuality and flexibility."

Uncommonly gentle with those in need, Ramos is equally determined when she believes she is right. In 1986, she was fired from the shelter she had formed.

But battered women kept calling her. Again, she took them in or found someone who would.

She moved to Ringwood and by 1992, she had founded another shelter in West Milford with a \$350,000 state grant, United Way aid, and private contributions. It's bigger than the Teaneck shelter - two farmhouses, 10 motel units. It had more residents - 63 women and children - a day-care center, and a new name: "Strengthen Our Sisters."

One friend called it "the second coming of Sandy Ramos." She was doing it her way again, or as one shelter worker put it, "with no bureaucracy ... like one gigantic family."

Which is not synonymous with disorganized.

"We provide shelter, food, clothing, transportation and counseling," said Ramos. "If we were a corporation our budget would be 100 times what it is. We perform miracles every day."

She calls the staff wonderful and dedicated. They call her a great motivator. But that only numbers 13, half which are former residents. "It's a major chore to keep the shelter functioning," she said. Some funding comes from the thrift store Ramos said in a local church four years ago. But Ramos who fought to get welfare funds for battered women in shelters, says that 25 years later the fight for money is no easier.

"That's because battered women are still not a priority in our society," she said. "There is more money in this world for destruction than nurturing."

For four years she has been fighting for \$300,000 in state marriage license fees, from the Division of Youth and Family Services, that each of the state's 23 battered women's shelters receives each year. In Bergen County, those funds are split by Alternatives For Domestic Violence and Shelter Our Sisters. In Passaic County, they go to the Women's Center in Paterson.

"Strengthen Our Sisters should have a fair share of the marriage license money," said Francis Treanor, who first led the board of trustees of the Teaneck shelter. "None of the other shelters that are being funded would be there if it weren't for Sandy."

Ramos who draws a shelter salary of \$22,000 and is an adjunct professor of social issues at Ramapo College, thinks there is more awareness of the problem now. "But it's still going on and many women are still losing custody of their children because they can't afford a good lawyer."

She has suffered her blows but she always gets up and keeps marching. And it's always in her own unique style.

"She's genuine, she's there, and she isn't going to put you on hold or refer you to another place," said Treanor. "Yes, she can be unorthodox at times, but when you need someone in the middle of the night, she's there."