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## Battered Women Give Thanks for Shelter's Aid

Apr 8 2000 12:00AM By PAMELA LANGAN Herald News

WEST MILFORD - In a quiet, secluded restaurant near Capri Lake, a group of women gathered together with tales of how they separated themselves from violent and abusive husbands and reintroduced hope in their lives, thanks to a local shelter.

"One day I was on empty, I had no gas, and I just left my house and went to a church and they gave me the shelter's business card," said Lena, who asked not to be further identified. "I was in a nine-year, violent marriage. They helped give me a lot of strength to move forward and feel positive and secure about myself."

They all point to Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS) Inc., a nonprofit organization that helps indigent and battered women with young children get back on their feet. The group's goal is to transform such women from victims into independent jobholders with healthy families.

The group's third annual Economic Summit featured round-table talks from former "clients" who have gone on to be successful women.

Sandra Ramos, SOS's founder and executive director, led the discussion, proudly giving the floor to a number of "unique and special" women she has managed to help.

"They were my cocoon as I grew from that ugly, little caterpillar into what I think is a beautiful butterfly today," said Stephanie Stapinski, a former shelter resident. Stapinski, originally from Clifton, said she was unemployed and unemployable, hooked on alcohol and heroin, a desperate mother of three when she came to the shelter. "I was scared and self-loathing, broke and spiritually bankrupt," Stapinski said.

Those who enter the shelter are given clothes, food, and instructional advice from volunteers in the group about computers, driving and interview skills.

Katherine Kenny, 23, came to the West Milford shelter in 1991 with her mother. They lived in Montclair with her father, who was a violent alcoholic. One day, she related, her father locked them out of the house. After they broke in, she brought a blanket to her mother and said it was time to leave.

Now, Kenny teaches driver's education at the shelter and her mother, Ellen, is the facility's housemother. Many former clients now have jobs with SOS, some doing clerical work, and a few work in a beauty parlor established to teach marketable skills.

Ramos said that she has had lots of help along the way, especially from long-time friend Frances Treanor. The two have worked together for more than two decades and that many battered women over the years have become part of one big family.

It is a bond that comes with the shared ordeal, they said.

While most clothes for clients are donated and many volunteers give their time to the organization, Treanor said they strongly depend on financial donations to build their daily operating budget.

Recently, a local bank helped the group establish a mortgage for a new convent, scheduled to open by the end of the year.

In addition, a website manager known to the group is in the process of asking local attorneys to donate their services for some women who can't afford counsel in separating from husbands.

The program works, said organizers, because shared pain is a unifying force.

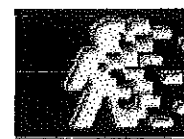
"This is a big operation that has not gone bureaucratic," Treanor said.

Individuals who wish to aid SOS are asked to donate their old cars, computers and clothes.

The group's website is [www.strengthenoursisters.org](http://www.strengthenoursisters.org), and its 24-hour hotline is 1-800-SOS-9470.

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